HEAVY METAL
ヘヴィメタルオブジェクト
HEAVY METAL OBJECT
鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI
イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン／
凪良 NAGIRYO
電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations

ヘヴィーオブジェクト

結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。くだらない殺し合いが淡々と続く中にも、変化はあった。
超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。
戦場に派遣留学した学生・クウェンサーは、整備基地で、奇妙な雰囲気を持つ少女と出会う。その少女は『エリート』と呼ばれていた――『オブジェクト』のパイロットとして。
近い将来。このちっぽけな少年は、少女のために、最強の兵器『オブジェクト』へと、生身で立ち向かうことになる。
これは、そのきっかけとなる出会いだった――。

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鎌池和馬（かまちかずま）

本日のレプリカント的観察日記。ハトです。自由に空を飛ぶ仕組みも十分に魅力的ですが、伝書鳩の方向感覚も結構すごいかも。ここらへんの研究が進めば、GPSや遠隔操縦に頼らない、完全自動操縦の小型偵察UAVとかができるかもしれませんね。

【電撃文庫作品】

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ヘヴィーオブジェクト

イラスト：風良（なずら）

バンダイナムコゲームスのゲーム「アルトネリコ」シリーズのキャラクターデザインをつとめる。電撃文庫では「シャープ・エッジ」「F」（著／坂入慎一）、「アブラクサスの夢」（著／高橋弥七郎）などを担当する。個人サークル「S.E.C」でも活動中。http://www.sec.or.tv/

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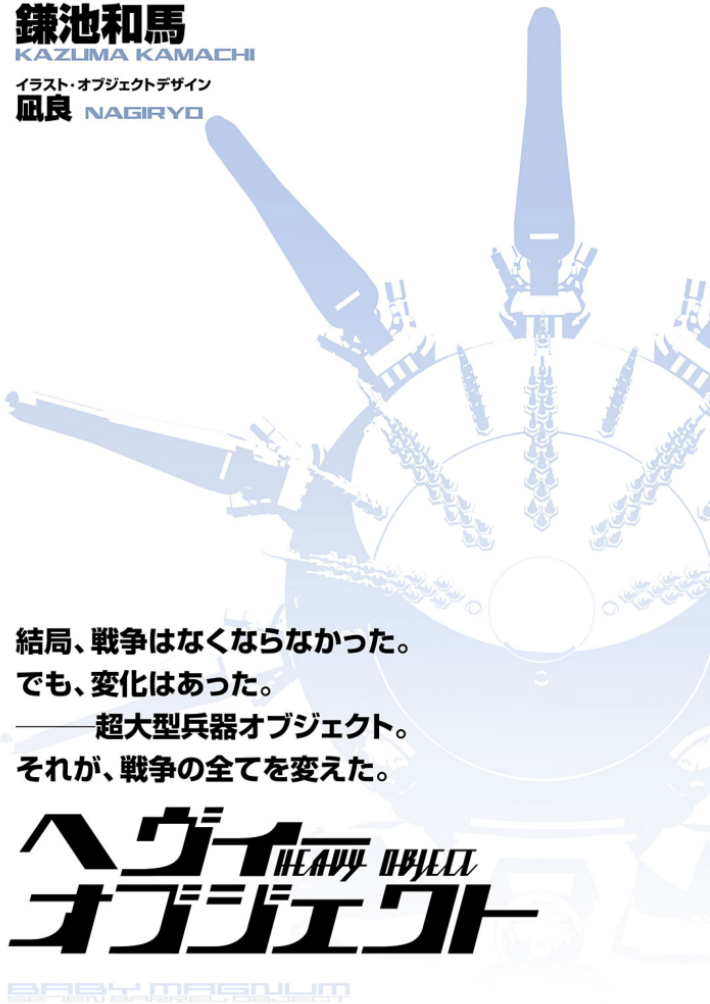

結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
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ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT

BABY MAGNUM

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【ベイビーマグナム】BABY MAGNUM

総合マルチロール型オブジェクトの一種。
本体だけで全長五〇メートル。砲の長さまで含めればそれ以上のサイズを誇る。
レーザー、下位安定式プラズマ砲、レールガンなどを備えた、本体後部から伸びる七本のアームがメイン兵装である。
他にも球体状の本体から一〇〇門近い砲が伸びており、地対空全方向からの攻撃に対処することが可能。
推進装置は静電気とレーザーを応用した推進装置を使い、縦横無尽に敵を迎撃する。

コックピットは球体状の本体の中心点にある。
搭乗者は「エリート」と呼ばれる資質か条件を持つ少女のみで、彼女達しか満足にオブジェクトを操ることができない。
なお、「エリート」ミリンダが駆る本機はあまりにも強力すぎてカムフラージュの必要がないため、カラーリングは白で統一されている。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 inc.)

MAGNUM BABY

クウェンサー
「うーん、今日も平和だ」
ミリンダ
「ヘイヴィア、前線にアイスコフィンの反応」
ヘイヴィア
「ヘイ、前線にナナイ機、スコアボードの上から2番目にいるやつ」
フローレイティア
「前線が崩壊しそうだから、援護に向かうよ」

戦争の代名詞はオブジェクトである。
生身の兵隊などに価値はない。
――フライド評議員

HEAVY OBJECT

ヘヴィーオブジェクト

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

In the end, war did not end.

Even in an age where development had reached every corner of the planet Earth, high output lasers could easily launch shuttles, and some of the most powerful people had villas on the moon, it seemed nothing had been done to fill the gaps between people's hearts. Well, supplement companies that sold digitalized "comfort" and "spiritualism" were not uncommon, but even so, the basic mechanism that brought conflict between people could not be removed from their mentality.

Was the change in the rules of war by the appearance of a new kind of weapon just another type of salvation for humanity? Or did it mean humanity had fallen even lower?

Yes, there was a change.

The people who were so immersed in their ridiculous killing changed as well.

It was all thanks to the giant weapons known as Objects.

Just the main body of these new weapons measured at over 50 meters while the guns added even more to their size. Their appearance caused the book on war to be completely rewritten. Large groups of soldiers no longer killed each other directly on the battlefield. Instead, the most important thing was to get the strongest Object to the battlefield in perfect condition.

Tanks, fighters, and the other previous main players became weapons of a bygone era.

Normal machine guns, shells, and missiles were treated like mere peashooters.

That was simply how much more powerful the Objects were.

When a certain island nation presented the first of those weapons, the rest of the world feared it and an allied force from 14 other countries carried out a combined surprise attack on the prototype Object… The Object repelled them all. At the end of the battle, a nuclear strike was carried out over the Pacific Ocean, but the scene of the Object continuing to sink the allied fleet while half of it was melting like ice under the hot sun was in every history textbook.

That island nation remained at the leading edge of Object development and it was clear just how powerful of a presence the Objects were.

Unsurprisingly, Objects became synonymous with war.

So what about everyone else?

Chapter 1: The Rank and File Soldiers that Tie Up Gulliver > > Battle on the Freezing Alaskan Snow

Part 1

In the end, war was nothing more than battles between Objects.

A flesh and blood human carrying around a carefully-maintained rifle could do nothing.

Even if tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of soldiers gathered or even if tons of tanks and fighters were prepared, that 50 meter monster would casually wipe them all out. Some of them could move around even after a direct hit from a nuke or two, so it seemed insane to seriously try to fight them.

That was why everyone just left the main role to an Object.

By shoving the pain-in-the-ass main role onto the monster, they could leisurely watch from the sidelines.

That may have been why the 800 soldiers filling the base zone, a base that specialized in maintenance, were so relaxed despite being on the front line of a battlefield.

The area was called a base, but all they had to do was efficiently maintain the Object and see that it was dispatched.

The flesh and blood soldiers only had to guard the giant weapon as it was being maintained during the short time it was there and they would be rewarded as heroes who protected their country with no thought to their own lives.

With the Object there, they were perfectly safe.

The Object that protected them was like a tree that grew gold. Just by watching it, it would defeat enemy after enemy after enemy. The soldiers insisted that all that was the result of the entire base zone's work so they should all be rewarded, and so their bank accounts became overflowing with money paid from the people's taxes.

In reality, the war was carried out by the Object alone.

As long as it was there, their lives and futures were basically guaranteed.

It was because they felt that way that a panic fell over all the soldiers watching from the base zone in the instant their Object burst into flames and blew up.

In the current age, war was nothing more than battles between Objects.

That meant that the defeat of one's own Object was always a possibility when the enemy also had an Object.

The white Alaskan snow storm obstructed their view, but they could still clearly see the red flames and black smoke.

The ejection device shot the pilot girl known as an Elite out into the sky, but no one was going to save a now-useless loser.

More important things were on their minds.

To reiterate, in the current age, war was nothing more than battles between Objects. Lining up tanks, fighters, and the other types of weapons used before would only be easily blown away by the 50 meter monsters that were Objects.

Now that their own Object had been destroyed, the enemy's Object could move about freely.

What that meant was simple.

They would be massacred.

The overwhelming stream of weapons fire would send their flesh, bones, and organs flying into the air in the hopeless and definite massacre.

Nothing was left for them but to flee. Yet even if they unhesitatingly chose to flee, it would be a miracle if even a tenth of the soldiers within the base zone survived. Not a single one of them recalled the most basic of orders within the military – to stand their ground and hold the line.

A hellish game of tag began.

It was a ridiculous game of tag between a monster over 50 meters long and tiny humans.

Part 2

One day prior, a boy named Quenser stood in a snowy area of Alaska. He was within the maintenance base zone for the giant Object. Quenser's build was different than what one would expect of a soldier. Simply put, he did not have the muscles a soldier needed. He looked more like someone who would be attending a school in a safe country. In fact, he could likely change what sex he appeared to be depending on if he was wearing pants or a skirt.

In reality, that overall impression was not incorrect.

The arms he was using to dig into the snow with a shovel were trembling due to exhaustion and myalgia.

"Dammit!! What's the point of this work!?"

The person who made that announcement and gave up was the actual soldier who stood next to Quenser. Quenser looked surprised and the soldier boy he had met in the base zone threw his shovel down.

"There are all sorts of different types of soldiers. I'm normally a radar analyst that checked the specs of the enemy's Object to find a weakness. I didn't join the army to shovel snow!!"

That intellectual soldier was named Heivia. As Quenser did not fit in well with the athletic-minded spirit of the army, he got along with the boy better than the others.

(…Well, we are similar types.)

With that arbitrary thought, Quenser spoke.

"It's not like there's any other option. All of the fighting is left to the Object, but the people living in peace back home wouldn't want to give up their tax money if they didn't see anyone working at all. I was watching the CS news channel and I saw Councilor Flide shouting about lowering taxes in order to get votes in the upcoming

election."

"That's exactly the thing though," said Heivia. "Even the folks back home can tell that digging up the snow like this to maintain a runway is useless. Knowing it's just for show makes me want to do it even less."

"Yeah, a fighter isn't going to do anything against an Object. In the mock battle, it took out 1500 of them and I'm pretty sure that in reality they just called it there because they were tired of counting." Quenser stabbed the tip of his shovel into the ground and leaned on it with both hands. "After all, Objects use anti-air lasers that are powered by a high-output reactor. Fighters may be able to fly at Mach 2 or 3, but they're no match for the speed of light. The instant the Object gets a lock, they're already shot down. I've heard that the armored units they mention in history classes were saved by dust and dirt and other stuff near the surface refracting the lasers, but the high altitude that fighters excel in is so clear that there's nothing to obstruct the laser."

"Those things are 50 meter monsters that can still move around after you nuke them. A fighter's nothing more than a small bird or gnat to them. Maintaining a runway is a waste of effort."

"Yeah, I've heard that the aces from the aviation unit only stay on standby in their cockpits so they can listen to the radio. But I doubt the tanks from those armored units would be of much use either. … And about leveling off this runway. Couldn't they just put a giant shovel on the front of an armored vehicle and plow it all out of the way in one go?"

"…What the hell are we doing…?"

"Well, I still prefer this to having to fight."

"That's not a very soldierly thing to say, but I've gotta agree with you," said the delinquent soldier Heivia in agreement with the boy of civilian origin. "We can just leave the fighting to the Objects. Losing your life on the battlefield just isn't done anymore. We just have to watch from afar and wait for the Object to bring back its success as a souvenir. People like us fighting is just out of the

question.”

“You’re a noble, right, Heivia?”

“Yeah, so I have to go out here and ‘become an honored soldier’ in order to prove my worthiness to become the next head of my family. Basically, if I put up with life in a base for 3 years, I can spend the rest of my life in a giant mansion flirting with my many maids.”

Contrary to his words, Heivia did not look pleased.

He seemed to not be entirely satisfied with that peaceful life.

“It sounds like you have it tough in your own way.”

“Yes. Unlike you, Heivia, I’m a commoner. I have to make sure I can get a job. That’s why I came here as a battlefield student.”

“Are you hoping to be an Object designer?”

“Learning at the actual site is said to be the quickest course to wealth. If I stay here for 3 years, I’ll have gained the best education you can get. Then I can gain money and the privileges of being a ‘saint that helps the heroes’ by manufacturing and selling Objects for those heroes to pilot.”

“Successful battlefield students are so highly praised because of all the barriers in their way. Since they don’t undergo the training of a soldier, I hear they start dropping like flies due to battlefield sicknesses and overwork. Hearing that does manage to remind me that this is indeed a battlefield.”

“Speaking of that, did you undergo training, Heivia?”

“Yeah, I went through the old style of training when I enlisted. It seems they wanted to build up a foundation of muscles and a spirit of camaraderie over a 5 month period, but I ended up like this regardless. Since I haven’t been in a single real battle since being assigned here, even my hand-to-hand combat skills have probably grown pretty rusty.”

“I’m perfectly happy living the kind of life that leads to forgetting how to fight.”

“That’s not a very soldierly thing to say, but once again, I’ve gotta agree with you.” Growing tired of that subject, Heivia moved on to another. “These nutritionally balanced military rations are just plain disgusting. What were the people who developed them thinking? … It’s more expensive than normal meat but tastes a whole lot worse. I just can’t stand it.”

“Aren’t they purposefully making it something with no flavor so the soldiers’ spirits don’t change based on whether they like the food for that day or not? People have different tastes when it comes to food, so they can’t make something absolutely everyone will like.”

“So they feed us something absolutely everyone will hate? Fuck that!”

“The food is paid for by the other people’s tax money, so you really shouldn’t complain. I will admit that capturing a deer and grilling it with some salt would be better though.”

Quenser had made the comment offhand, but it made Heivia freeze in place for some reason.

He turned eyes of pure admiration toward Quenser.

“…That’s a battlefield student for you. You really are a genius.”

“Hey.”

“You’re right. If we don’t have any good food, we just need to go catch it ourselves.”

Part 3

And so Heivia threw aside his shovel, grabbed his military rifle, and headed outside the base zone. A conifer forest that seemed to jut out of the white snow surrounded the area. It was an area of nature that seemed like it would have more wild animals than they could ever want.

Quenser had been dragged along, but he put down the rifle Heivia had shoved into his arms.

“Let’s go back. The superiors will come after us if they find out. I can already hear them going on about lacking a love for animals or something.”

“C’mon, I know you’d rather have some juicy meat over those rations that taste like petroleum jelly. And I don’t understand why they praise you if you shoot an enemy soldier, but they get mad if you shoot an animal.”

“That’s because bullets aren’t free. They used the tax money to buy them in order to kill enemy soldiers, so I’m betting they just don’t want us wasting them,” explained Quenser, but Heivia was not listening.

He was heading deeper and deeper into the thick forest, following deer tracks in the snow.

(…I’m not going along with this.)

Quenser picked back up his rifle and sat on a nearby stone.

He looked back toward the maintenance base zone.

However, he was not looking at a line of thick reinforced concrete buildings. The base zone Quenser belonged to was a mobile base, so it was made up of a large collection of vehicles. These base vehicles were much larger than even large trailer trucks. The soldiers’ quarters, the radar control tower, and everything else were located

onboard those large vehicles. Even the Object maintenance area was put together by lining up several giant trucks that were dozens of meters long.

That was yet another aspect of the rules of war that Objects had changed.

Rather than fortifying a single defensive position, it was more militarily important to be able to swiftly get the Object to any place it needed to be.

Quenser thought as he stared at that base of the new age.

(My superiors with their military decorations are sitting in a warm room sipping coffee as they wait for the Object to return.)

However, holding a grudge was not going to lessen the Alaskan chill and Heivia was right about Quenser being tired of the bland and tasteless rations.

Quenser dug through the pocket of his military uniform that he was still not used to wearing. He pulled out the survival kit he had been issued along with the knife he did not know how to use. The kit had everything needed to treat wounds as well as tools to start a fire or catch a fish.

(In an age where Objects deal with everything, even this is a waste of taxes.)

When stored, the fishing pole was only about as long as a ballpoint pen, but when extended, it was around 50 centimeters and looked like the kind of pole that would be used to catch wakasagi. However, it was made of a military carbon something-or-other so its strength and flexibility were exceptional. Instead of bait, the kit had a few different types of lures. It seemed they had tried to find a way to allow one to fish without wasting any bait.

Quenser walked around for a bit and found a meandering stream. He broke the ice covering the surface and let the fishing line hang down into the water.

“Ahh, today sure is a peaceful day,” he muttered despite being on

the front line of a battlefield.

Part 4

However, an amateur student could not properly use a survival kit so easily. It was unclear if Quenser would even have been able to catch a fish with a proper fishing pole, so it was no surprise when he did not catch anything no matter how long he waited.

He heard intermittent gunfire in the distance.

Of course, it was not enemy soldiers drawing near; it was Heivia chasing deer in hopes of getting one for dinner that night. In that day and age, the idea of flesh-and-blood soldiers attacking a maintenance base zone that held a giant Object was unthinkable. It was like trying to destroy the wall of a nuclear shelter by tackling it.

Just as Quenser was thinking that, he heard crunching footsteps in the snow.

“What is going on?”

He spun around and saw a girl with a puzzled look on her face. The girl looked to be around 14 and looked even less suited for the army than a battlefield student like Quenser.

She had fluffy blonde hair that reached her shoulders and white skin. Rather than a pure blue, her eyes were a light sky blue and she seemed to be staring off into the distance so it was difficult to get a grasp on her emotions.

The delicate lines of her body went beyond merely slender.

Her question seemed to have been in regards to the distant gunshots rather than to Quenser himself.

Quenser gave a blunt response.

“We’re going to have a barbecue tonight. I’m in charge of the salmon and Heivia’s in charge of the deer. I may have been the one to bring it up, but I don’t even know if deer meat is any good. I’ve

never had it before, so I'm a little unsure. I just hope it doesn't taste too strange."

"…You'll come to an early death if you have a barbecue with no vegetables."

The girl gave a sigh with the expression of someone who had opened a box and found something uninteresting inside.

Quenser looked away from the fishing pole that showed no sign of a bite no matter how long he waited.

"Where are you headed, princess?"

"Are you trying to provoke me?"

The girl's expression usually remained relatively unchanged, but she looked slightly offended there.

However, Quenser and the girl were barely acquainted and he was unsure what to say. She had likely only spoken up on a whim. He doubted any situation would come up where he would need to communicate with that girl.

After all, she was an Elite, a pilot of the giant weapons known as Objects.

While he had helped out at the Alaskan maintenance area, he had exchanged simple greetings with her, but he doubted that was enough to create any kind of friendship. Their positions were simply too far apart. He was a dime a dozen student and she held a position that very few had even within a single nation.

Unlike Quenser and the others, she wore an outfit exclusive to Elite pilots. The suit was rather difficult to describe. It was clearly different from a normal military uniform. It was a mainly indigo blue skintight suit that started at her neck and covered even her hands and feet. The boots and gloves seemed to be detachable and they were connected on with fasteners.

Over that, she wore a black armored vest to protect her torso and a type of pocket that spread out like a miniskirt. Apparently, the

bottom of the vest and the top of the pocket attached when she was piloting the Object. In what may have been a military tradition, the neck of her suit had a sailor uniform collar attached that somehow looked like part of a school uniform from a safe country.

The suit was highly water resistant so it could be worn while working underwater and it would even stop blood from flowing to her lower body to preserve the functionality of her brain just like air force suits did. The special suit was very Object-like in the fact that it outdid each of the previously existing branches of the military.

Quenser recalled being surprised when he had first seen her light sky blue eyes in the maintenance area. At first he had thought they were truly glowing, but he had been wrong. When piloting the Object, weak infrared rays were used to allow even the movements of her eyes to act as an input device. Long exposure to that laser had lightened the original blue color of her eyes.

That lightening was not an unwanted destruction of the functionality of her pupils' lenses by the laser. Instead, it was an advancement allowing the laser to be even more effective, so her eyes would not grow any lighter once they reached a certain point.

The girl turned those light-colored eyes that were the sign of an Elite toward Quenser and spoke.

"The Object is being serviced. I had nothing to do, so I was

wandering around outside. That was when I heard what sounded like gunfire."

"…Oh, crap. You could hear that back at the base? We probably have a lecture waiting for us then."

"And the old lady chief was yelling something about 'that stupid kid' running off and wasting a perfect chance to learn something since the Object was undergoing maintenance."

"Oh, crap! This is worse than I thought!!"

He started running back toward the base zone, but then…

"…No, wait. Even if I run back now, I'm still going to get that lecture, so my options here are really to get yelled at empty handed or to get yelled at after catching some salmon. …I see, I see. I'm not going back until I catch at least one even if I die first."

"If you acted more maturely and did not do things like that, they would not get mad at you so often."

Quenser returned to the fishing pole mostly out of escapism and the girl looked at him with a shocked look in her eyes. Either she truly had nothing better to do or she was not used to someone who was not a proper soldier (to the soldiers, piloting the Object was a matter of life or death, so they tried to keep their distance from the Elite girl to make sure nothing unexpected happened) because she continued to hang around. This was unlike when he helped out with the maintenance because then they would only exchange a few businesslike words.

(…Could it be that this princess is also tired of the rations, so she's interested in the salmon?)

Quenser did not dare speak that thought aloud because he was sure it would make her most displeased.

He continued trying to come up with something to talk about, but the girl continued speaking before he could come up with anything.

"You came here to study the Object, correct?"

“Yes. If I can survive helping out with the maintenance here at the base for 3 years, nothing but success awaits me when I return home.”

“Why this base?” asked the girl curiously. “You know what kind of Object I pilot at this base, don’t you?”

“It’s a Composite Multi-Role Object. …In other words, it can be freely used in any environment on the earth and in any weather conditions. It’s the most standard type of the giant weapons. It’s fine on land or in the sea.”

“Standard is another way of saying old-fashioned.” The girl sighed. “The second generation Objects are not so greedy as to claim to work anywhere. An Object developed to fight in the desert without any thought to fighting anywhere else will outdo a normal Object in a desert battle.”

That was a theory that had started to gradually spread throughout the Object manufacturing industry.

When the first Objects had started appearing on the battlefield, a composite Object that could fight the same in any battlefield in the world was a king of beasts with no natural enemy. However, when multiple Objects started popping up in the various battlefields across the globe, the situation had changed.

A composite model that could be freely used anywhere had no real weaknesses. However, this also meant that it had no real strengths. When the situation had changed from an Object crushing normal weapons to an Object fighting an Object, the question of how to make one’s own Object stand above the rest came to the forefront.

One suggested answer to that question was to create an Object that had definite strengths even if that would destroy the even balance of its functionality. Afterwards, that Object would have its activities kept to the environment it excelled in, giving it an advantage over other Objects when it fought.

“Here in Alaska is the same. We have a normal Object with no disadvantages and they have an optimized Object with definite

strengths. In this snowy area, my Object may not be able to win."

"But you've continued to use that Object, right, princess?"

"…I have no choice," the girl known as an Elite said with some hesitation.

All the previous giant 50 meter weapons had become "old generation models" due to the latest weapons, but not just anyone could become an Elite that piloted those Objects.

They were the people who met every desired condition under a search carried out using the army's flowchart of conditions.

Also, a human only became a terminal that controlled an Object after they had abilities developed that easily overcame those of your standard genius by having their nature artificially honed, refined, and improved by chemical and electrical means to match an individual Object.

Once an Elite was developed so utterly, their fate was linked with that of their Object.

Elites could not pilot just any Object. They could only pilot the Object they had been fine-tuned for. In fact, it might not be wrong to think of an Elite as someone who had their brain fine-tuned for a specific Object.

Elites could only pilot the Object developed for them or an Object further developed from the one that used the same tree diagram.

In that case, what would it mean if the type of Object you used was becoming obsolete?

"I might not be able to win," the Elite girl who piloted the invincible Object said suddenly. "I might not be able to keep up."

That girl had had her brain fine-tuned for the sole purpose of piloting that Object.

"As someone who has actually worked on the maintenance of the Object rather than just believing in it, you should know. So why did

you come here?"

"Because I value things differently," responded Quenser after thinking for a bit. "Only the soldiers get so obsessed over what is strong and what is weak. I'm a student. If I don't stay with an Object with academic value, I won't gain the knowledge and skills I need."

"…?"

"If I learn about a standard, basic model, I can use that knowledge anywhere. On the other hand, if I study a model that has already been optimized in one direction, I can't use that knowledge anywhere else. For a battlefield student, your Object is the best option."

His opinion did not take any of the serious issues like winning the war into account, but he could say that kind of thing because he was not a soldier.

"If you try for too much on the battlefield, you will not live long."

"True, and that's why battlefield students have such a low survival rate. But I'm butting in here on the battlefield in the hopes of getting rich quick, so I won't complain."

Hearing Quenser say that, the girl who was a veteran of many battles tilted her head in puzzlement like a normal girl.

"So you're prepared."

"Yes, well, I hate working slowly through normal schoolwork, so I'm desperate for this chance to skip ahead. I need to be prepared for whatever it takes."

"Hmm," said the Elite in a reaction that gave the impression that she was a little slow.

And then…

"Really?"

“?”

This time Quenser was left staring at her in puzzlement. However, it seemed the girl had no intention of continuing the conversation. She turned around and left that forested area of Alaska, leaving the boy with his rifle and fishing pole.

In real life, people often did not think back on strange things that happened.

In just such an example, the reason that Elite girl had spoken to him like that was something Quenser probably should have thought back on a little more.

After all, Objects were synonymous with war and flesh-and-blood soldiers had no value.

However, that also meant that just thinking about it may have been pointless.

Part 5

As expected, they received a lecture.

The two idiots named Quenser and Heivia were dragged to the barracks for the distinguished commissioned officers. Just like everything else, those barracks were inside the large vehicles making up the base. Three vehicles were bolted together alongside each other, creating a rectangular building about the size of a four-story building. Of course, the vehicles could be separated at any time in order to fit on a narrow path.

Quenser and Heivia were within the topmost fourth floor area of the officer barracks.

(Damn Japan-obsessed bourgeois.)

It was not simply due to the splendid interior decoration of the room that the two of them had that same thought in unison. It had a lot more to do with the fact that they were being forced to sit in the Japanese seiza style on the hard floor.

Meanwhile, their superior officer, Froleytia, was not sitting on the hard floor. The inner half of the room was raised up higher than the rest and had tatami mats laid out on it. She was sitting in front of a short-legged desk in the middle of the tatami mats. She was seated upon a zabuton cushion so soft a cat would likely never get up again once it lay down on it.

She was a beautiful woman with long silver hair.

Her hair may have been slightly dyed because the silver was tinged slightly blue.

She was tall, she was slender, and she had large breasts that greatly pushed out her uniform. The legs wrapped in black stockings that stretched down from the tight skirt of a female officer were not simply slender. They were overflowing with a streamlined beauty that somehow drew the eye. Her palely colored lips held a pipe. It

was not the short, thick type of pipe loved by European detectives. Instead, it was a long, narrow Japanese kiseru that was just under 30 cm long.

Quenser did not know if it was from the type of tobacco she was smoking or if it was a scent mixed in with her hair, but he could faintly smell sweet aroma.

"…You know why you were called here, correct?"

Her words were colder than the snowy plains outside the window when they stabbed into Quenser and Heivia's ears.

They of course knew perfectly well why they had been called there.

They had left their snow shoveling duties to search for food outside the maintenance base zone. Since Heivia had also been firing his military rifle all over the place, it would have been odd if she had not been mad at them. It was on a level where they could easily be thrown in the detention barracks or possibly even court martialed.

"(…What are we going to do, Heivia!? This is why I told you to stop!! This was all about the rations, but I'd rather eat nothing but snow for the next three days than this!!)"

"(…Shut up, dammit!! God damn, is she really only 18? I know normal soldiers aren't needed on the battlefield in this day and age, but I bet she could take on an Object with nothing but a clenched fist!)"

"Quenser, Heivia!"

Just by having their names called, the two straightened up in shock. Froleytia was not even looking in their direction. She was playing with a long, narrow hairpin about 20 cm long that was modeled after a Japanese kanzashi while running a pen-like object across a board on top of her desk.

The board was known as a tablet.

Quenser had thought the devices were normally used to draw using a computer, but…

“Does this interest you, Quenser?”

“Y-yes!!”

“It may not be on the same level as you two who spend all your time searching for food, but I am quite busy. It may seem like nothing compared to you desperately burying the meat and fish you caught in the snow so it would keep, but I have to remotely command an operation on a small island in the Pacific while remaining here in this Alaskan base zone.”

“U-umm…”

Quenser moved only his eyes to look at the wall to the side. The entire wall was a giant LCD monitor and it was displaying a large map of the ocean and some islands. V-like red checkmarks continued appearing in relation to how Froleytia manipulated the tablet.

“Yes, it’s actually quite simple. I make marks on this board and the giant Object on standby there fires a long distance bombardment that blows away the bases of the guerrillas. It really is simple, isn’t it? Please tell me you think so,” Froleytia said nonchalantly as she continued adding more checkmarks. “Tablets really are nice. For one thing, it seems it can read the intensity of my guts from how hard I press down it as I write. I get the feeling that the long distance operation today is going especially smoothly.”

She must have actually been quite angry as she gave her commands because a creaking noise was coming from the plastic pen-shaped tool she held.

When they imagined the bits of flesh flying through the air somewhere in the world each time she made a checkmark, Quenser and Heivia started trembling.

“As I was saying, I am quite busy commanding multiple base zones and units at once, but then some idiots decided to give me even more to deal with. …By the way, can you imagine what is going on within my heart right now?”

“Yes, ma’am!! I would very much rather not envision it though! I can tell that you are quite pissed, Froleytia!!”

“Good. I am glad I have such excellent subordinates. I do, don’t I? Nod if you agree,” Froleytia said, finally looking in their direction with a sadistic smile.

After she had finished giving her orders to the units in the Pacific and had checked that the operation was complete, her expression suddenly changed to a carefree one.

“So what did you manage to get? I’ve had just about enough of those giant edible erasers they call rations.”

Part 6

Ultimately, the issue ended such that dinner that night sounded like it would be quite nice (Quenser and Heivia still had to run 20 km in the snow later as punishment though), but there was still some time before mealtime.

“You mean that hellish run is starting now!?” said Quenser as he braced himself for the announcement, but Froleytia shook her head.

“You are a battlefield student. If I don’t send you over to the maintenance area to study the Object, I think the old lady in charge there would end up yelling at me.”

“Uuh!? I forgot I’d skipped out on that, too!! That means I’m also going to get a lecture from the old lady who can outdo even you!!”

“Oh, and Heivia, you can continue shoveling snow on your own. Make sure that runway is useable by sunset. The air unit has been complaining.”

“Noo!! That sounds worse than the 20 kilometer dash!! And why doesn’t the air unit get off their asses and help!?”

And so Quenser parted ways with Heivia and headed for the Object maintenance area.

It was a giant building that completely enveloped the giant weapon that was over 50 meters long. Just like the officer barracks, it too was created from several vehicles linked together.

Vehicles with flat beds 15 meters long and 10 meters across were lined up on both sides and two quickly constructed walls had been set up with a roof connecting them. Overall, it looked something like a cross section of a warehouse. The large maintenance area was constructed of a few of those linked together.

In addition to the standard shutters, the maintenance area also had an emergency means of letting the Object out. The base vehicles

making up the maintenance area were linked together surrounding the Object, so they would instead break apart and move away from the Object when it needed to leave. Since that method destroyed the floor of the area, it was not normally used.

Quenser entered the giant building through a small back entrance for maintenance soldiers.

The giant 50 meter Object that was a symbol of military might was an overwhelming sight.

Surrounding the reactor at its center was a thick wall like one for a nuclear shelter. The wall created a sphere-like form. Its undercarriage was in a reverse Y-shape and it did not walk or roll on wheels like a normal vehicle. Instead, it used static electricity to float just a bit off the ground. The theory behind it was completely different, but its movements made it look a bit like the ground beneath it was moving to slide it along.

Of course, merely covering the ground with static electricity was not enough to make such a large construction float. A spray that acted as a repellent to the electrified Object was sprayed on the ground as it advanced.

It used a laser as a means of propulsion.

The power of static electricity created a small gap between the Object and the ground and the air in that gap was heated up by repeatedly firing a laser that was reflected and concentrated. This heating caused the air to explosively expand which provided propulsion. It was the same theory used in the laser launch pads for shuttles.

Its main pieces of military equipment were the 7 arms stretching from the back of the sphere.

The 7 giant guns attached to them could pierce through even Objects of the same rank.

It also had about 100 other gun batteries covering the surface of the sphere. It looked less like an optimized weapon and more like a

strange weapon that had every piece of weaponry its creator could think of stuck on.

In modern times, it was the cornerstone of the military.

It was the cutting edge in the history of war.

It was an Object.

Over 200 thick wires similar to the ones used on cranes were connected to the walls and ceiling, anchoring its giant form in place. Countless walkways ran through the air and many maintenance soldiers wearing work clothes were immersed in various types of work.

Suddenly, the high-pitched sound of a wrench striking a metal railing echoed throughout the area.

Quenser looked up in surprise and saw an old lady yelling at him from a third-floor passageway.

“So you’re here, boy! You should thank me! I’m willing to take any help I can get, so I’ll even use an unrefined boy like you! Grab some tools and get on up here!!”

“Sorry I’m late!! About my punishment…!!”

“I don’t mind, I don’t mind. A maintenance soldier shows his worth with his results!!”

Hearing that, Quenser headed for the third floor using a simple stairway that could detach at the press of a button.

“(...Ohh. Thank goodness she’s an understanding old lady. And here I thought I needed to be afraid of her.)”

“(…Well, if he ends up not being of any use I can stuff him inside an empty drum and hit it with a metal bat from the outside.)”

As they muttered their respective comments such that the other could not hear, the two of them started their work on the third-floor passageway.

The old lady was working on something related to the system.

The Object's cockpit (and emergency escape hatch) was located on the upper back part of the main spherical body. No one wanted to think about it, but the piloting Elite would be ejected in an upwards diagonal trajectory from the back in case of an emergency.

Currently, dozens of barriers were opened to create a route to the center of the sphere and the light from the cockpit's monitors could be seen shining deep within like it was the opening to a tunnel. The tunnel was not simply a path to the cockpit. It also branched off to connect to various other places such as the maintenance room for the reactor, the thick double-layer door where additional fuel was added, or the room to exchange the attached box in which exhaust gases were compressed and sealed. It was reminiscent of a subway tunnel made of barriers and switching rails.

Meanwhile, the old lady was leaning back against a railing near that tunnel and looking at a handheld device.

"That connects directly with the Object's system wirelessly, right? If you don't need a long cable to connect it, is there really any need to open all the barriers down to the cockpit…?"

"You idiot. The Object's barrier walls cut off electromagnetic signals. If they didn't, an enemy Object could mess with the system mid-battle."

Suddenly, a bluish-white flash of light surged up in the corner of their vision, so they both fell silent. A welder was working on the Object's armor.

The main body of the Object alone was over 50 meters, but it was not made by pouring melted steel into a ridiculously huge mold. Steel sheets about the size of a curved tatami mat were prepared and dozens, hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of them were put together to create the giant sphere.

The point of the many thin sheets was to disperse and distribute an impact rather than provide the defensive power of a thick wall. The theory was similar to that of a simple bulletproof vest, but it used so

many steel sheets that it could even hold back the shockwave of a nuclear strike.

“It’s called onion armor, right? Not only is it tough, but pieces can be easily switched out when an enemy Object damages it. Whoever came up with the idea deserves a Nobel Prize.”

“It may sound simple, but each individual sheet of armor is custom made and tempered by a skilled artisan like a Japanese sword.”

“The heated steel has a few milligrams of a powdered fireproofing agent added in, right? From what I’ve heard, that makes it stronger, but makes the metal difficult to reuse.”

“It’s all thanks to the skilled hands of the artisans. A machine just can’t get the distribution right, so it ends up actually being more brittle.”

Quenser and the old lady looked down from the passageway just as a forklift carrying spare curved steel sheets passed by below. The forklift had “A beautiful victory for Princess Milinda!!” written on the side in large English letters.

(That’s the princess from before.)

As Quenser had that thought, the old lady continued to speak beside him.

“Personally, I was more surprised by the mechanism with which electricity is supplied from the reactor in the center out even to the laser cannons on the outer surface without using a single cable.”

“It uses a printed circuit board-style of power supply, right? By setting insulating material and conductive material in place and burning them onto the steel plates, power can be supplied without having to lower its defenses by opening holes in the armor for cables. The person that came up with that deserves a Nobel Prize, too.”

“Really, boy. You make it sound like everything is so easily made.”

The old lady slowly shook her head. At the same time, she carried

out maintenance on the Object's software with quick motions of her wrinkled fingers over the handheld device.

As she continued to work, she asked Quenser a question.

"So you're hoping to be a weapon engineer?"

"Eh? Oh, about me wanting to be an Object designer. Well, for a commoner like me, I was thinking that would be the best position to get a wealthy life out of. As far as money and social status go, it easily outdoes some of the lower classes of nobles."

"You aren't gonna get a proper life out of being a wealthy merchant. …Well, it's your life, boy, so I won't stop you. So what are you thinking of making your field of expertise as a weapon engineer?"

"I was hoping to go with the total frame."

"You idiot. No newcomer in the making is going to get a job putting together an entire Object. That's like saying your dream for the future is to become a billionaire. It's just too vague. Don't students like you usually start by studying the something convenient like the replicant field in order get a job with a defense contractor and then learn the more complex things there?"

"Yeah, well, I'm not too fond of the whole replicant thing." The idea must have brought something to mind, because Quenser made an unpleasant expression. "That's the field that comes up with new ways for machines to move based on the movements of insects and other animals, and I don't like spiders and roaches and things like that. Although you basically just observe bugs, so I'll admit the research for that field is pretty cheap."

"You coward. You're the one that'll be crying later because you failed to build up the basics."

"I wanted to study an Object with standard features like the princess's as a battlefield student in order to quickly learn those basics without having to go through all that other crap."

"Why do you think the leaders of the home country built zoos and

insect museums in all the major cities? They've spent the people's taxes in order to supply inspiration to the promising youths who are trying to design Objects."

The old lady sighed.

Quenser then looked over toward the entrance to the tunnel-like route leading to the cockpit.

"Speaking of promising youths, isn't it about time for the pilot…or rather, the Elite selection scouting? When I was at school in the safe country, government officials dressed all in black would come loiter around the school."

"They have to do it four times a year, but they probably won't find anyone qualified this time either."

"Elites have to conform to something called Element, right? What is that?"

"…It's a general term for the conditions an Object pilot must meet." The old lady's fingers stopped moving along the handheld device and her tone grew a bit colder. "That said, it isn't some kind of esper power that allows them to operate the special equipment. Well, it's true there is an aspect to it that they are naturally born with, but the Elites are a military project to thoroughly refine natural talent using even things like electric stimuli and suggestions. With that method of creating them, the biggest impediment comes from human rights issues rather than a lack of money or equipment."

"You mean…?"

"Those who qualify have their human rights completely ignored, but no one complains and even the Elites themselves truly wish to fight for their country even after having been developed like that. People that meet those conditions are not exactly common. …The Elites being raised will be piloting the ultimate weapons and it would be a problem if they turned their weapons on their home country."

They heard a mechanical noise and the old lady added in a whisper, “Don’t speak with her.”

A seat exited from the tunnel-like route using the cockpit elevator. The Elite princess was sitting in the seat with her upper body strapped in with an H-shaped belt.

“So you’re finally here, sleepyhead.”

“I apologize. I have no excuse.”

“Here, boy, I have a job for you. Service the emergency ejection device. No one else’ll do it because they say it’s a bad omen.”

In any age, that was the kind of job left to an amateur. The amateur would take care of the ill-omened, useless jobs while watching how the pros did their work out of the corner of his eye.

Quenser circled around to the back of the chair the girl was sitting in and started working.

“Speaking of superstitions, is that why the Object is completely white? Or is it just camouflage for the snow?”

“At first, it was properly camouflaged to match its environment,” said the girl.

“But the king of beasts that has no natural enemies does not need to hide and paying for the paint got expensive, so now it’s just white. …Not to mention that something 50 meters long can’t be hidden so easily,” added the old lady.

“Hehh. It’s not the same as the replicant stuff we were talking about, but I heard rumors that there was a project to intimidate the enemy with patterns based on ferocious beasts or insects.”

“There was also a plan to create a terrible mode where it would continually make a horrible scraping noise from changing gears. Neither plan ever got anywhere.”

“?”

“The enemy is not the only one that sees the Object. It would be pointless if it wore away at your allies’ morale as well and they can’t exactly show some horrible looking Object off to the citizens in a parade in a safe country.”

“I see,” responded Quenser. “Then what about that rapier hanging down from the ceiling on a rope?”

“That’s a traditional good luck charm.”

“It ensures victory,” chimed in the girl.

As he listened, Quenser continued moving his wrench.

He heard a slight clicking noise and then the girl’s head shook just as she was about to say more about the good luck charm. Quenser looked questioningly over from the back of the seat at the back of the girl’s head.

“I can’t breathe.”

“Oh, shit! You idiot!! Don’t mess with the setting of the belt!! You’re constricting the princess!!”

“What!? Did I just do something really bad!?”

“I can’t breathe,” the girl repeated.

Quenser frantically grabbed the tool again, but he did not know what he had done to affect the belt.

The old lady ran to the small work elevator.

“I’ll go find a knife!! Boy, you take care of the physical work! Pull on the belt to make a gap so the princess doesn’t suffocate before I get back!!”

As Quenser was still panicking, the old lady left.

He quickly circled around to the front of the seat.

“I-I’m sorry!”

“I don’t mind… Just do something.”

“Okay!!”

Quenser decided to do as the old lady had instructed and pull on the belt to keep the girl from suffocating.

…But the H-shaped belt was digging into her chest in such a way that it emphasized her breasts.

“Umm…”

Quenser’s fingers stiffened somewhat.

To grab the belt, he would have to make a hook shape with his fingers and dig down under the belt, but that would require him to touch the bulges on the girl's chest.

(Despite her childlike proportions, she has quite a bit there…)

As useless thoughts like that raced through Quenser's mind, he heard the girl's quiet voice.

“…I’m going to die.”

“!?”

That was right. He could not hesitate in a situation like that.

(I’m saving someone’s life here. This is serious. I screwed up. I need to make up for that. But those are her tits. No, no, that’s not the issue here. I need to stay serious. If I don’t hurry, her life is in danger. I need to save her. I need to do what I can for this princess. Tits!!)

“Ooohhhhhhh!!”

Having finally prepared himself, Quenser reached out for the girl’s chest with everything he had before his jumbled thoughts could weaken his resolve.

“Ee…!?”

The princess gave a small shriek like that of a small animal and he stopped.

(Not good. I just locked onto her tits rather than the belt, didn’t I? I can’t be grabbing her tits with an aroused look on my face that would make her feel her chastity was in danger. But what am I supposed to do? How can I save her without defiling her!?)

“E-emergency…measures…” said the princess as her face was growing paler and paler.

“What? Do you have some way out of this!?”

“Yes…but…”

As she spoke, the girl pressed a button hidden under the seat.

Immediately afterwards, the seat she was sitting in exploded.

The H-shaped belt binding her was automatically severed and her small frame flew high into the air. However, Quenser was not able to just watch that. A mass of compressed air struck his body sending

him flying a few meters away.

He landed rolling on the walkway and he saw a large white flower out of the corner of his eye.

It was the emergency escape parachute.

Normally, the high speed elevator would take her from the cockpit to the outer surface, the entire seat would be launched into the air, and finally the compressed air emitter in the suit would activate as the third stage. However, she had only activated that final stage which had sent her flying up almost to the ceiling.

(That ejection device really is a bad omen.)

As he muttered that in his heart, Quenser heard a voice.

“That’s the first time I’ve had to use that.”

Part 7

Once the sun had set, it was time for dinner.

Instead of heading for the mess hall, Quenser headed out into the falling snow. He was having a barbecue that night. As he had caught the deer, Heivia was of course joining him, but it seemed their superior, Froleytia, would be there too because she claimed to just care about her subordinates that much.

Everyone was bored since they left everything about the war to the Object. If they had offered, it seemed likely all 800 soldiers would have come along, but Froleytia decided it should remain a confidential matter between the three of them. After all, they only had a limited amount of meat.

And so the three of them had their barbecue.

They held their barbecue within the grounds of the maintenance base zone.

The base zone was nothing more than a collection of large base vehicles and they had secretly gathered in a space surrounded by facilities on all sides so the winter wind would not blow on them too much. There, they built a fire and placed a metal sheet above it.

Froleytia, the superior officer, had gotten there first and was warming her hands on the fire she had started. She may have been the one looking forward to the dinner the most.

“Even if I warm myself, the cold still permeates my body. I need to eat some fatty meat to warm myself from the inside.”

Quenser glanced at Froleytia’s legs.

“Aren’t stockings warmer than bare legs?”

“Do you want me to shove them over your head so you can find out, Quenser? These are just for my appearance. They give nothing but peace of mind. Do you choose your socks based on what will

keep out the cold best? I'm jealous of you guys that get to wear pants year-round," said the woman in the tight skirt before turning to Heivia. "Good work, Heivia. Thanks to you, the runway can be used to take off from at any time. I'm sure that the STOL group from the air unit will thank you as well."

"Heh heh. It was nothing."

"But really the air unit is completely unnecessary. Those cowards removed all the weapons from their own planes, claiming it was to improve agility and stealth functionality. Really, they're just afraid of having the enemy decide to shoot them down because they see them as a threat. They brazenly claim to specialize in reconnaissance, but almost all of the information on enemy Objects is brought back from the princess's actual battles."

"Dammit!! I had a vague idea that what I was doing was useless, but it really pisses me off to have someone else say it!! And given the condition out here, the snow'll probably all be back by morning!!"

"Well, the age of fighters started going on the decline as far back as when chemical oxygen iodine lasers started being put on bombers. …The units were simply too big to fit on a small fighter. Once light came into play, being able to fly at the speed of sound didn't matter so much. And then Objects came along. They have all sorts of different kinds of lasers. They can shoot repeatedly and in any direction. It's impossible to fight against that in a fighter. All air units can do these days is bring in pizza from the safe country before it gets cold."

"…That was 700 meters. I cleared snow from all 700 meters of that short takeoff runway all on my own!!"

As Heivia trembled in anger, Froleytia stuck her tongue out where he could not see her. She then spoke to Quenser much more familiarly than how she gave orders to her many subordinates.

"By the way, I hear you spoke with the princess outside the base zone," asked his beautiful superior officer who even had carefully-maintained manicured nails despite being a soldier on the front

lines.

Her tone made it sound like that was more important than the fact that he had disobeyed his orders.

“Umm, is that a problem? I talk with her occasionally in the maintenance area, so I just interacted with her in the same way. Should I have thought more about our positions?”

“I don’t see a problem with it. Apparently, the medical group feeds her rations even worse than ours to make absolutely sure her health does not suffer, but I say that will lead to the stress doing her in before poor nutrition ever would.”

“Doesn’t the Elite princess have an exclusive recreation building? From what I hear, it is supposed to be filled with devices that have digitalized healing effects,” said Heivia more politely than he was wont to do.

Froleytia grabbed a juicy piece of cooked venison with the chopsticks she used as part of her Japan obsession.

“That thing costs us all sorts of money, but does no real good. Do you think you could actually have fun playing with teaching materials your teachers at school handed out? Apparently, the princess dropped by once and has never gone there again.”

“So that’s how it is,” replied Quenser as he was reminded of the conversation with her from earlier that day.

He could not imagine anything making that girl smile.

That was the girl who had ominously said she might not be able to win in the next battle.

As those words of hers floated up in his mind, Quenser asked, “Have you ever lost, Froleytia?”

“Yes,” she readily affirmed while looking like she wished she had some beer to go with the meat. “I’ve lost three times when commanding remotely and once with the unit I was stationed with. It was terrible. The criticism when I returned home was worse than

the flight itself. But that isn't too surprising. I had lost a weapon used for strategies on a national scale after all."

"Eh? Objects are synonymous with war, right? What do you do once the other side destroys your Object? I doubt you could manage with a tank or a fighter," asked Heivia, brimming with curiosity.

"It's simple. You raise the white flag," responded Froleytia nonchalantly.

"Hah?"

"Wars these days are not all-out wars. Once one side's Object has been destroyed, the victor has been decided. And this victor doesn't have the time to spare needed to pursue all of the powerless infantry units. No treaty has been formally made in that regard, but it's one of the basic facts of war that no one even feels the need to bring up. If the unit quickly retreats and surrenders the territory, there is no need to make things more complicated and hunt them down."

Seeing the gaping mouths of the two novices, Froleytia put on a carefree smile.

"Ha ha. I understand why you're so surprised by that. When they train you, they don't want to lower the tension, so they don't tell you about conventions like that. But just look at me. I joined the military as a child soldier at 13 and have been on various campaigns ever since, but I do not have a single scar. In order to prevent any unnecessary deaths, we use clean weapons like Objects that gather all the military might in one place rather than spreading it out. My lovely skin shows that this is truly a 'safe battlefield'." Froleytia spun her chopsticks around a little. "Did you know that the #1 reason for soldiers to be sent home from this unit is not being shot by the enemy or carelessly stepping on a landmine? It's actually due to fights between men and women within the base zone. On the modern battlefield, you need to be more afraid of love affairs than bullets. Do you see just how peaceful this place is?"

Quenser started to agree, but then a question popped into his mind.

“Wait. But Froleytia, weren’t you sending bombardments directly on enemy bases using a friendly Object in the Pacific earlier today?”

“You have a good eye, Quenser. That was not a war against another proper army. Attacks against guerillas or terrorists are nothing but suppression operations, so the previous conventions do not apply. …Listen up and remember this. That is the most efficient plan for using an Object. Large nations need some kind of mechanism for skillfully pushing back opposing forces.”

As the unpleasant turn of the conversation was ruining the taste of his food, Quenser decided to change the subject. The only subject other than the Objects he could come up with was the food.

Quenser looked at the venison that was acting as the main part of their dinner and then looked over at Heivia who had hunted it down.

“So are soldiers trained in how to hunt for food? I’m only at the level where I might be able to catch a single salmon after 3 hours.”

“Modern rifles have more than just optical scopes. They also have infrared cameras and microphones for searching for the enemy. It’s made so you can trace your target in multiple different ways. I wouldn’t end up with anything either if I headed into the great outdoors with just a fishing pole. Although the rifles are a complete waste of taxes since all the fighting is left to the Object.”

Froleytia then spoke up while skillfully using her chopsticks.

“Unless the supply line to the base zone is cut off, we can get as much food as we want from the home country. And the base will never be taken out as long as we have the Object. Even when I was a new soldier, they didn’t always train us in how to hunt animals. At the very least, it certainly isn’t a skill combat engineers like you need.”

“A combat engineer…hm? I just can’t get used to how that sounds.”

“The management of the base zone revolves around taxes. If we didn’t give a job to the students that hang around, it could affect

the number of votes the politicians get. The climax of the council election is coming up back in the home country and Councilor Flide is getting worried."

There were many different kinds of combat engineers, but the ones Quenser and the others were talking about were soldiers that dealt with explosives. However, they were not professionals that used them to kill enemy soldiers. Instead, they destroyed bridges to cut off the enemy's path or blew stones out of the way of their own path.

For a student who was full of strange knowledge and did not have the guts to actually shoot someone, that role was perfect. There was also the course of being a medic, but Quenser's specialty was machines and he did not know much about living things.

"But then our base is made up of the base vehicles, so we can set up camp just by driving those vehicles around, and we also have the Object. There really isn't much for combat engineers to do."

"That isn't just the combat engineers. It's pretty much the same for everyone in the base zone," said Froleytia as she reached her chopsticks for one of the few pieces of salmon. "God damn this is a peaceful world. It feels like my gun could rust over and I could get zits from over-nutrition."

"I know. As long as we have the Object, we're safe. After three years in a base, I have the path of a noble waiting for me and Quenser here can go back to the safe country and become one of those distinguished scholars," said Heivia with a smile as he patted Quenser familiarly on the shoulder.

"You kids are making me jealous," spat out Froleytia, but there was not the slightest hint of jealousy on her face. Most likely, she preferred staying on the safe battlefield to being promoted from the military to a strict political post.

"Yeah," Quenser said. "As long as we have the Object, even those dulled by peace like us can fight a war."

Quenser's words there addressed one truth of the world.

It was true *as long as they had the Object*.

Part 8

A day later they would know.

They would know what kind of hell awaited soldiers utterly dulled by peace once their Object was destroyed by an enemy Object.

Froleytia had said that they merely had to raise the white flag if they lost.

However, she had also said something else.

No treaty has been formally made in that regard.

Part 9

An explosion tore through snowy Alaska.

The giant invincible Object that had been fighting 10 kilometers away through the snowstorm started emitting black smoke and stopped moving. Through binoculars, the pilot's seat could be seen being ejected and slowly floating down to the snowy ground with its parachute.

And….

"…"

An unpleasant noise that echoed in his gut reached Quenser's ears over the wind. The symbol of their safety, the Object, had been blown away by the enemy Object.

Its main body was a giant sphere covered in thick armor. In four directions, long insect-like legs stretched out to the ground. Its main weapons were sets of two low-stability plasma cannons, each measuring 50 meters. After a special gas was loaded into the cannon, a massive amount of energy from the reactor artificially created superhot plasma which was then fired. The sets of two were located on the front, back, left, and right creating a horizontal cross of cannons that allowed it to fire in any direction. It had a total of 8 of those cannons. Its spherical main body and four legs had countless laser beams, railguns, and coilguns, giving it over 100 guns in total.

The main body alone was 50 meters and the cannons stretching in each direction gave it a size of over 140 meters. The mountain-sized mass was slowly pointing its mid-range steel bridge-sized cannons their way. The set of two low-stability plasma cannons could melt a nuclear shelter buried deep in the earth in a single shot.

"…Hey," said Heivia suddenly as he stood dumbfounded next to Quenser. "Why is it aiming in our direction? If the Object loses, we just have to raise the white flag and it's over, right? That's what

Froleytia said, right!? So why!? This isn't something to be slow about. Hurry and raise the fucking white flaaaaaaaaggggggggg!!"

Quenser looked at the radio he had been issued.

He could hear an intermittent signal coming from it.

That was most likely the modern digitalized white flag.

Froleytia must have followed the convention she had spoken of in order to bring the battle to an end. She may have made up her mind quickly in order to keep the number of sacrificed subordinates as low as possible.

However, the enemy Object had not stopped.

The sound of the cannons making slight adjustments to their aim seemed to be implicitly saying it did not care about the convention.

"Run…" someone said.

It was possible it was Quenser himself who had said it.

"Ruuuuuuuuuuuuuuuunnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!!"

Had the 800 soldiers in the area been able to react?

A great roar and flash of light pounded Quenser's senses.

Something seemed to be trying to smash his skull, much less his eardrums. The Object was not firing metal shells. It was using brutal low-stability plasma cannons that made use of the excess energy it produced.

What temperature did it reach?

Before he could think that, his consciousness was sent flying.

A beam from one of the low-stability plasma cannons had struck some of the base vehicles a short distance from Quenser. The vehicles used to construct the Object maintenance area were the largest of the greater than 100 large base vehicles that made up the

maintenance base zone and one of those became distorted like a sugar sculpture before exploding like an erupting volcano.

The blast blew Quenser onto the thick snow.

Even while buried in snow that had to be below zero degrees, Quenser's body was wrapped in an unpleasant sweat.

"What…?"

He could not even hear his own voice.

He frantically tried to check on the situation despite having lost over half of his ability to see and somehow managed to determine that he was in one piece. The low-stability plasma cannon must have moved along a straight path as it fired because he noticed an empty trench cutting through the deep snow.

(Was the heat so great…it melted the snow…and then caused a phreatic explosion…?)

It was possible even the steel had evaporated and then stuck to the ground.

As Quenser lay dazed on the ground, someone grabbed his arm.

It was Heivia who had bloodshot eyes and was breathing erratically.

"Hey, we need to get out of here."

"…What…?"

"We need to get the hell out of here!! Our Object was taken out and their Object is perfectly fine!! We wouldn't be able to do a thing even if we had 100 tanks. If we don't get out of here, we'll be slaughtered like a line of ants!!"

Running away.

What that meant finally hit home with Quenser.

When he looked around, he saw the other soldiers beginning to take action. The base zone was made up of over 100 large base vehicles. The soldiers were climbing or jumping aboard the nearest base vehicle and the vehicles were breaking their normal formation and scattering in a panic.

Shouts could be heard from all directions.

None of the soldiers were saying a single thing about fighting.

“Dammit!! Send out all the UAVs! Draw the Object’s attention away from us!!”

“Do we have a set escape route!? Is there any narrow mountain path that 50 meter monster can’t get through!?”

“Do we have a proper stock of chaff and flares!? Even if we can’t fight, we might be able to make it lose its lock on-…!!”

Because they were real soldiers, they knew just how hopeless it was to attack the Object head on.

As he watched it all, Quenser blankly spoke to Heivia.

“Run away…but where to?”

“…!!”

Heivia’s expression grew distorted out of fear rather than anger.

It was as if hearing how hopeless the situation was from someone else had brought the full brunt of the shock back all over again.

Immediately afterwards, they heard an odd noise.

Looking over, they saw the Object that was over 10 kilometers away approaching as if it were sliding. It was not moving using tires like a car. By using repeated small accelerations like a water strider, it moved smoothly around on both level ground and the steep slopes of mountain surfaces. It seemed to completely ignore the terrain just like a spotlight moving along the ground.

A low sound like an approaching thundercloud remained in Quenser's ears.

(Oh, shit. So it uses static electricity just like our princess's one…!)

Even as the frantically fleeing base vehicles started leaving him behind, Quenser merely stood in a daze amid the snow.

That Object was floating just slightly above the ground using static electricity. It weighed over 20 tons, but the reactor within it was both clean and more powerful than a nuclear reactor. It used that ability to create enough electric energy to make itself float.

A faint but distinctive smell reached Quenser's nose. Most likely, the Object was spraying out the material that repelled its giant electrified form. Generally, the repellant would break down naturally in a few days and it was made to be harmless to plants and animals, but it smelled even more repulsive than blood to Quenser.

Something that huge moving as if the surface below it were sliding was a very strange sight indeed.

The base vehicles were trying to escape through a valley between two mountains.

With a sound like a thundercloud, the Object moved as if to circle around the vehicles and passed right up the diagonal side of one of the mountains. It then moved down into the path inside the valley to block their escape.

Their escape route had been cut off in only 20 seconds.

What awaited them now was clear.

"Shit!! Get off of there!!" shouted Froleytia.

Immediately afterwards, the 50 meter Object opened fire with its cannons.

No, it was more than that.

The Object had more than just the low-stability plasma cannons. After all, the huge 50 meter mass had a reactor that was both clean and more powerful than a nuclear reactor. With its low-stability plasma cannons, laser beams, railguns, and coilguns, it had over 100 different weapons.

It opened fire with all of those.

Each of the high output weapons was so large that it would likely cause a normal battleship to tilt just by being installed and yet it had over 100 of them.

There was no point in trying to count how many times one heard a weapon fire.

Thousands and tens of thousands of roars piled atop each other and combined together creating a single giant explosive din.

As the base vehicles broke formation in an attempt to find anywhere they could flee to, countless shells and beams of light mercilessly assaulted them.

The block-shaped facility walls could withstand a direct hit from a normal shell, but they were blown away along with the beds of the vehicles like they were made of paper. Repeated explosions were heard as gasoline caught fire and soldiers' bodies were thrown high into the air.

Heivia immediately grabbed Quenser's head and dove down into the deep snow to hide. Even so, it was nothing short of a miracle that the Object's bombardment did not tear their bodies in half.

(…No…)

Quenser's head alone remained clear while the rest of him was in a state where he could not even tell what temperature the cold snow was.

(There aren't any miracles or coincidences when it comes to Objects. An Object doesn't leave enough of an opening for that kind of thing!! There has to be a reason. There has to be a logical reason we weren't killed…!!)

Quenser looked over at a base vehicle being blown away by a railgun being used as crudely as a peashooter (even though it was powerful enough to be installed on a bomber). It had soldiers in its sights that were trying to flee, but the Object adjusted its aim toward a different base vehicle.

Seeing that, Quenser's expression grew even more twisted.

"Dammit!! The maintenance facilities!!" Quenser shouted so loud he

thought it would tear apart his throat in order to keep the explosions from drowning him out. “Get away from the vehicles used to service the Object!! They’re aiming for anything related to the Object! If you don’t get away from them, you’ll be hit dead on!!”

Just as the soldiers jumped from the large base vehicle in shock, the Object’s low-stability plasma cannon mercilessly blew the maintenance facility away.

Objects were synonymous with war.

No matter how many tanks or fighters were gathered, you could not stand up to an Object.

That was why the enemy Object was giving priority to destroying the spare parts storage and other facilities that could be used to repair the Object it had destroyed. In the off chance the Object could be reassembled, a true Object vs. Object battle where the winner was unknown would once more unfold.

That Object was not sparing the soldiers’ lives.

It was first utterly crushing all possibility of a counterattack. After that, it would use its greater than 50 meter form to chase after and slaughter each and every one of the flesh-and-blood humans who looked like ants compared to it.

The base vehicles were destroyed one by one.

Even though they knew it was not targeting them, Quenser and the other soldiers desperately hid. Just a slight misreading of the situation could get them crushed by one of the tatami-sized wall fragments that were flying from all directions.

“We need to get out of here while we can,” said Heivia as he grabbed Quenser’s arm with trembling hands.

Quenser ignored the tugging on his arm and simply remained motionless and listened.

“It doesn’t matter where to!! We just need to get as far away as

possible from that monster! Just run!!”

He was not suggesting a strategic withdrawal; he was suggesting fleeing from something scary.

And…

“…”

(It…stopped?)

The Object that had blown up most of the major base vehicles had stopped moving amid the rubble and wreckage. Only the many giant gun turrets moved around slowly as if it were contemplating something.

Quenser thought his heart would stop.

Now that it was done destroying the Object-related facilities, was it going to start slaughtering the soldiers?

That horrible thought came to Quenser’s mind, but he still could not make his body move. The same thing seemed to have happened to Heivia next to him. They knew that their enemy was human with a mind of his own and was in fact a soldier just like them, but the presence was just so overwhelming that it felt like a giant dragon was staring down at them. It felt like the slightest provocation would get them torn to pieces by its vast maw.

They knew the Object was only moving based on systematic military orders, but Quenser and Heivia felt like herbivores that had run across the king of beasts and could only pray that it would spare them on a whim.

And…

The giant object that measured over 140 meters if its main cannons stretching out in four directions were included started to move. It changed directions with a motion similar to someone turning around because they were tapped on the shoulder from behind. With the sound like a dark thundercloud approaching, it headed in the direction it had originally come from. The soldiers on the path

did everything they could to get out of the way, but the Object paid them no heed.

“What…?”

Quenser finally picked himself up off the ground and looked in the direction the Object had left in.

“Why are we alive…?”

What had been different between him and the human forms scattered about that lay unmoving on the ground? Quenser could come up with no answer to that question. Heivia spoke from nearby.

“I don’t know, but let’s go. I don’t know what’s going on, but we managed to survive. If we run as far away as we can now, it might make all the difference!!”

Heivia’s body was trembling terribly.

Quenser thought Heivia was right, but then he stopped.

He had noticed something at his feet.

It had likely been blown from one of the base vehicles used for their base zone. It was an LCD display. It was about the size an A4 piece of copy paper and it seemed to have wireless capability. It was emitting an electronic beeping noise.

The display showed a map of the area.

On a single point of that map, a red point was blinking.

(…A rescue signal…?)

All of a sudden it hit Quenser what it meant.

“The Elite princess!!”

The enemy Object was giving priority to eliminating all possibility of the destroyed Object being repaired. To do so, it had blown up

the maintenance facilities and left the soldiers alone.

Didn't that meant it would be only natural for the enemy to give top priority to killing the pilot girl who could possibly pilot a different Object?

"Hey, you noble and student over there!!" shouted Froleytia from a slight distance.

They looked over and saw the beautiful woman with her steel-like bluish-silver hair making large gestures toward the slope of a mountain.

"We need to use this chance to escape!! I'll prepare an official reason for the withdrawal to report to the higher ups!! If we get over the mountain, there's a large valley. A single suspension bridge is the only way across!! Once we get across, we can get away from that giant Object!! It might try to bombard us from this side of the valley, but we might make it if we scatter once we're hidden within the conifer forest on the other side!!"

"But…"

Quenser's gaze moved between Froleytia and the display at his feet.

In all honesty, he was overcome with so much relief he thought he would pass out upon having a clear goal he could escape to.

But…

What would happen to the Elite girl who was still alive…?

That thought stopped Quenser.

Froleytia then noticed the display at Quenser's feet.

"You idiot! Why do you think she's sending out the rescue signal!?"

"…?"

"It isn't for us to see! The princess is transmitting the rescue signal so the enemy will intercept it and have their attention drawn

toward her!! She's making sure we won't be slaughtered!! Do you want waste all the effort she's going to!?"

Quenser's eyes opened wide.

Froleytia's words had stabbed deeply into his heart.

(Is that true…?)

Quenser looked around the area at the soldiers who were supposed to have tough muscular bodies from constant training but had neglected their training due to the benefits of the Object. They all averted their gaze whenever Quenser looked at them.

They looked awkward.

They looked as if they did not want to let go of their chance to escape.

(Whatever you say, she's our ally and a girl of about 14 to boot. She's the kind of person who is using herself as a decoy to save us. Can you seriously think of abandoning her…?)

"We're leaving," muttered Heivia. "We have no other choice!! Whatever we do, that princess will be killed, so we need to escape before that Object returns!!"

"Fuck that! Do you really understand what you're saying!? Have you thought about what will happen to an Elite girl if she's captured by the enemy army that has clearly said to hell with morals!?"

"What!? Are you saying you're going to fight that Object!?"

Having those words shouted straight back at him silenced Quenser.

Heivia's expression was filled with fear and disgrace.

"Anyone can just sit back and do nothing while they say what they think is wrong or right!! And if you *can* face that giant Object on your own and save the princess, that's great!! But in reality, you can't do shit!! The instant that thing catches you on its radar, it'll

blow you away so utterly not even dust is left!!"

Quenser thought as Heivia grabbed his shoulders.

(…Dammit.)

The gradual tightening in his chest was the natural response as a human.

He was feeling overwhelming fear.

(Of course I'm afraid. No matter what anyone says or how much wishful thinking they bring up, I can't work up any courage. An Object is a monster. Trying to take on something like that is just wrong. I want to be as far away from it as possible. Heivia is right. No matter what I say, this sickening feeling isn't going to go away…)

However, Quenser's feet did not begin taking him to safety.

He merely stood in place and looked at Heivia once more.

"…But wasn't that princess fighting that monster?"

"…"

"That monster makes grown men tremble in fear and makes us feel like we'll die of shock every time it slightly adjusts its aim!! And yet she was piloting an Object all on her own to protect us from it!!"

Even if she was piloting a ridiculous weapon like an Object, she had to have been afraid. There was no way she wasn't when facing a monster like that.

The day before, she had said she did not know if she could win.

She had not seemed especially serious, so Quenser had not read any deep meaning into it. However, he had been wrong. What if she had been holding so much unease below the surface that it had spewed forth even while she had such an unconcerned expression on her face? What if she had just wanted to say something about it to someone – anyone – to try to get rid of even a small piece of that

unease?

Quenser thought about what he should do.

“…Give me that.”

Quenser held his hand out toward Heivia.

Heivia merely looked puzzled, so he repeated himself.

“Give me that rifle!!”

Quenser snatched the military rifle from Heivia. The high-tech weapon had an infrared camera, a microphone for searching for enemies, and other gadgets in addition to its optical scope.

However, Heivia’s face stiffened upon seeing that.

“…Are you really going?” Heivia shook his head back and forth like a small child. “What good will that thing do!? Didn’t you see that Object!? That monster is basically a giant reactor with the thick walls of a nuclear shelter around it!! It can still move after a direct hit or two from nuclear missiles!! Surely a future scholar like you can understand that!!”

“I know,” replied Quenser.

Heivia’s primary job was as an analyst who searched for the characteristics and weaknesses of Objects, but Quenser was learning about Objects from a design point of view. From his knowledge, he knew quite well that there was no way he could win.

But…

“I have no choice…”

“What?”

“Do you really believe that the Object won’t catch up to us if we cross the mountain and the valley on the other side?”

“Well…”

“If they truly want to kill the princess, it’ll just need a single shot. And if they want to capture her and take her back to their base, the Object is free to come after us once the normal soldiers restrain her. It’ll be turning back before long to slaughter us as we climb the mountain. …You saw how maneuverable it was, right?”

Quenser could feel his body tremble at the weight of the rifle because he had never seriously used one. He suppressed the trembling and continued on.

“It seems the princess is trying to buy some time, but she probably can’t buy enough on her own.”

The words he spoke did not seem real to him.

He wanted to get moving before he was too overcome by fear.

“Someone has to do something. Not out of responsibility, but in order to survive.”

Part 10

The slicing blizzard sent a sharp pain across the skin of his face.

The white filling his vision needlessly increased his unease.

The deep snow seemed to grab hold of his feet like a bottomless bog as Quenser desperately continued to run while holding the rifle in both hands.

He had been on the front lines for 6 months, but this felt to him like the first time he had actually been running on a battlefield.

His objective was to save the princess.

There was no reason he had to fight the Object. In fact, if he did run into it, he would be killed as a piece of trash rather than an enemy. He wished he had some way to approach through a blind spot of the Object and save the princess, but….

(Where?)

The rifle felt as cold as a hunk of ice.

Quenser gritted his teeth and looked around while putting up with the pain in his fingertips.

(Dammit! Where is she!?)

He could have sworn the display had indicated that area, but the Elite girl was nowhere to be found. Had enemy soldiers already taken her away? Or had he misread the map and gone to the wrong spot?

(God dammit! How could I have survived 6 months out here without knowing how to find my position on a map? …How much have I just been relying on others?)

Quenser stuck a cable into the scope area of the rifle. The other end of the cable had a small earphone for one ear. He put it in his right

ear and operated the unfamiliar rifle with shaking fingers.

According to Heivia, it had a microphone for finding enemies.

(…)

While focusing on the microphone sticking out near the barrel like a bayonet, Quenser slowly rotated in one spot. While in the process of turning the microphone in every direction, he heard a slight noise through the earphone.

“This way…?”

He had not been properly trained, so he held the rifle as he had seen others do as he headed off in the direction of the noise.

As he approached, the slight noise grew gradually louder.

Eventually, it started to sound like human voices and Quenser frantically hid behind some nearby rocks.

He then stuck only his face out.

He could see human forms on the other side of the white curtain of blowing snow.

He guessed they were about 100 meters away. From that distance, he could not tell what they looked like, but he could see three or four muscular figures surrounding a single short figure. The short figure was on her knees unnaturally with both her hands behind her head.

(The princess! Shit, so she was caught after all…!!)

Quenser brought his head back behind the rocks and then looked around the area.

He could not see the giant form of the Object anywhere.

It may have headed back to hunt down the survivors now that the Elite girl had been captured.

For an instant, Quenser thought it might all be some absurdly huge trap and he would be shot by the low-stability plasma cannons from long distance the instant he made a move. However, he realized that was unlikely. He doubted they would use the Object to set up a trap for him alone and the giant Object would not need to set up a trap to deal with a mere human anyway. It would just slaughter him outright.

He may have been so afraid that his mind's danger sensor was not working properly.

The Object was simply so frightening that he was taking completely unrealistic possibilities into account.

At any rate, if he calmed down and thought about it…

(The Object isn't here.)

Quenser noticed the weight of the rifle once more.

He stuck his head out from behind the rocks to check on the situation.

(If I can do something about those four, I can save the princess!!)

A different unpleasant feeling than the fear of the Object now started tightening around his heart.

He had to "do something about" those four.

With that rifle in his hands, "doing something" meant shooting and killing those four humans. Quenser was not skillful enough to suppress them without hitting their vitals and the bullets in that military rifle were powerful enough to rip off a limb if he hit them there. They would die of shock whether he hit their vitals or not.

Could he really kill them?

Could he kill four people to save a single comrade?

(God dammit!)

He wrapped the other hand around his uncontrollably shaking fingers.

He could not keep his teeth from chattering.

(This is the battlefield. Killing is the norm here! By leaving all the fighting to the invincible Object…is this what we've been pushing onto her!?)

In a desperate attempt to work up some courage, Quenser pounded on his own thigh with his fist and then forced himself to hold up the rifle. However, he started feeling dizzy when he looked through the scope. He held back the urge to vomit and somehow managed to aim.

He was aiming for the male soldier closest to the Elite girl.

He put the sights right in the middle of the unsuspecting man's head.

Now he just had to pull the trigger.

However, as if it had frozen solid, his finger on the trigger would not move.

(…This is a human.)

As he forced down the urge to vomit, the image through the sight shook.

(This isn't one of the human-shaped targets from the training grounds. It's a real human. This is a soldier just like us who has become dulled by peace after being protected by his Object and only wants to return safely to his country…)

He could not shoot.

Just as he realized that fact, he heard an odd noise through the earphone in his ear.

It was a sound being picked up by the rifle's microphone.

It was the words coming from the mouth of the soldier he was aiming at.

“Hey, let’s test out the durability of the Elite’s special suit. Once the Object returns, we can tie her hands to it with a rope and have it drag her behind it. The test will be whether she’s naked or not by the time we get back to base.”

Quenser’s movements stopped when he heard that.

He then heard a laugh and the words of another soldier.

“No matter how easy it is to slide on snow, wouldn’t that still turn her to mincemeat?”

“Yeah, and what’ll we do if she’s still alive once we get back to our base zone? Are you gonna do a test on the wonderful Elite’s body? I hear the guys from the torture room were complaining because their tools are rusting over from lack of use.”

No, it was not his movements that had stopped.

It was his trembling that had stopped.

As well as the urge to vomit that had produced the trembling.

His heart had cleared.

He switched off the microphone as if shutting out what the soldiers had to say.

Quenser had a new thought.

He had not been able to pull the trigger because he had thought of them as human.

But…

They weren’t, were they?

A great noise exploded out and the rifle bullet had blown one of the laughing soldiers’ heads to pieces before Quenser even realized the

noise was due to his finger pulling the trigger. Ignoring the collapsing headless corpse, Quenser shouted out.

“Get down!!”

Had the Elite girl understood what those words meant first or had it been the enemy soldiers around her?

Just as the girl threw her body down into the deep snow, Quenser used quick movements of his finger to fire bullet after bullet in semi-auto mode. With as little training as he had, he doubted he could deal with the recoil of firing on full auto. However, the enemy soldiers did not just stand there and let him shoot them. Almost reflexively, they turned their rifle barrels in the direction of the voice and fired.

Quenser had been only slightly faster.

Quenser only wanted to mow down everything there, so he just moved the barrel from right to left as he fired rather than carefully aiming. By repeatedly pulling the trigger, he sent bullets flying at even intervals which created a hurdle of death at about waist height. Fortunately, he had caught them by surprise. Red blood sprayed into the air and soldiers were mowed down onto the snow.

(…I might actually pull this off…!!)

However, two of the enemy soldiers had immediately gotten down and escaped the spray of bullets. As Quenser stood fully upright due to the recoil of the rifle, he could see one of the surviving soldiers aiming his own rifle while kneeling down. While keeping low to the ground, the princess tackled him. In a close-quarters struggle, the soldier could not fire his rifle. Quenser panicked, but his worry was unwarranted. The princess held a metal skewer for cooking that had been in the same standard-issue survival kit that held bandages and a small fishing pole. She used it to stab the enemy soldier in the side.

The one remaining soldier immediately tried to move away from the princess, but he carelessly raised his body too high. Immediately afterwards, he was struck by one of the bullets from Quenser’s rifle

and collapsed onto the snow.

It was over.

Or so Quenser thought.

The soldier who was bleeding from the metal skewer the princess had stabbed in his side pulled his rifle's trigger as he collapsed to the snow. Most likely, he had not intended to do so, but he happened to hit the trigger for the grenade launcher on the bottom of the rifle. The barrel was pointed in a random direction…which just so happened to be in Quenser's direction.

The heavy explosive flew through the air in an arc rather than a straight line.

Quenser was unable to decide what to do in the instant he had.

Immediately afterwards, Quenser was sent flying by the blast and an odd pain ran through most of his upper body. The color white filled his vision. At first, he thought it was the sky, but it was actually the snow-covered ground. It took him a while to even realize he was lying on his side.

(…What…happened to me…?)

Just as that question entered his mind, all strength left his body.

He somehow managed to move his hand that had frozen up as if from rigor mortis, but the rifle grip slipped from his fingers. His arm then fell back into the snow.

He finally started feeling a throbbing pain in his gut and chest.

(Shit, what happened? Are they all dead? I didn't miss any of them, did I? None of them are going to get back up, are they?)

No more shooting occurred.

Had he killed all of them, had they fled, or had they stopped because they considered finishing him off a waste of bullets? Buried in the snow as he was, Quenser could not tell.

(…Kh…)

He tried to look at his wounds, but his body would not move as he wished it to.

Meanwhile, even his mind seemed to be ceasing to function properly.

(What about the princess…?)

He had come all that way to rescue the Elite girl and yet he no longer had the energy left over to see if she was even alive.

His consciousness sank down into darkness.

Even the pain that had risen up seemed to vanish rather than exploding out within him.

Part 11

He thought he heard someone calling his name.

All he could see was strange scenery that was neither black nor richly colored. It seemed like he was seeing the images coming from his two eyeballs in mosaic without his brain processing them. While Quenser had lost his sense of balance, feeling like he was going to vomit, and stared blankly at that scenery, he heard someone call his name for sure.

“…Hey, wake up, Quenser!! Don’t go to sleep! Wake up!!”

“Heivia…?” Quenser muttered in a scratchy voice.

His body had to have sunk into the snow, but he could not feel it at all.

“Why? Didn’t you run away…?”

“Shut up. I had no choice.”

Heivia had a portable anti-tank missile hanging from a strap. He had to have known it would be of no help, but he must have wanted to bring as much firepower with him as he could. Quenser could tell Heivia’s body was still trembling.

Fear of that Object was not something that could be so easily wiped away.

Even so, Heivia had followed after Quenser.

“…Was I hit…?”

“You amateur. The grenade wasn’t directly aimed for you and it only blew some fragments off of a nearby rock. Your upper body was hit by the fragments of scattered stone. If you had been hit by shrapnel from the grenade, it would have ripped your flesh apart. They’re made so they’ll do that.”

“I see. Damn I’m pathetic… Did I pass out from fear after just a few scratches?”

Quenser tried to get up, but he groaned after feeling a powerful pressure on his chest. It seemed the mental shock had been great enough to make his heart contract too much. He coughed and finally managed to pull himself out from the snow.

“Oh, crap! Where’s the Elite princess…? Was she taken away while I was passed out?”

“What are you saying? You won. You took out all those bastards, so don’t worry. Look, hero. The princess you saved is right over there.”

Quenser looked in the direction Heivia pointed and saw the Elite girl standing about 2 meters away. She was standing stock still while staring at Quenser’s face as if she were looking at something she could not believe.

Her expression was rather difficult to describe.

Extraordinary fear was certainly present. As was incomparable shock. She also looked as if she could not yet tell if she should feel relieved. Overall, her expression was not one easily described using any standard emotion.

“Why…?” she said with a wavering voice that she could not hold still due to the waves of emotion roiling within her. “Why did you come to save me…?”

After that, her true thoughts spilled forth as if from a hole in her heart.

Or perhaps she had felt something that made her not want to lie any longer.

“You are not the one who is meant to fight. You are not an Elite. You were not protected by thick nuclear-shelter like armor, so why did you come here?”

Quenser pondered her words silently.

Something deeper than what she normally showed on the surface was present in her words.

“And I would mock you in my heart.”

Her words continued to spill forth.

That may have been inappropriate for the Elite pilot of the Object that was the cornerstone of their military force and, in a way, the representative of their nation.

“I mocked you because you always needed me to protect you and because you would all be killed without the Object!”

However, that unseemly inappropriateness was what made it seem truly human.

Quenser realized that her too-pure image was not something like natural water; it was more like tap water that smells of chlorine.

“I wanted to deny it and I wanted to have a more proper opinion, but I would always have those horrible thoughts about you!! So why did you come here to save me!?”

Quenser and Heivia exchanged glances.

They then looked back at the Elite girl.

They looked back at that girl who had lost her role with the loss of the Object.

“What do you mean ‘horrible thoughts’? That’s the truth.”

“Eh…?”

“I’ve tried to study as much as I can about Objects, but I only just now understood something upon actually fighting one today. Those things are monsters. Really, truly monsters. And who was it that has been fighting all alone this whole time to make sure those monsters did not come destroy our base zone?”

The girl looked at Quenser with a surprised look.

The long time spent buried in the snow and the mental shock he did not seem able to shake off had stiffened his face, but Quenser moved the stiff muscles to force a smile.

“But no longer,” Quenser said as he picked up the rifle that had fallen to the ground nearby.

He pulled out the empty magazine and replaced it with a new one Heivia gave him.

Compared to an Object, it was a puny weapon.

With it in hand, Quenser faced the girl and gave a truly horrible expression.

“You no longer need to fight alone. Is there any real reason you have to?”

The girl did not seem to know how to react to that.

She was an Elite, the pilot of one of the giant weapons known as Objects.

It might have been that no one had ever said anything like that to her before. She had been given the burden of many lives, winning had been expected of her, and she had even been implicitly threatened that she would lose everything if she lost. She had been desperately fighting under those conditions. That was why she had never raised a voice of protest against that solitary fight no matter how damaged she became or how much unease she held.

The girl did not seem able to fully accept Quenser’s words.

She turned her troubled gaze toward Heivia, but he only shrugged.

“I’m nothing special. Quenser just said that you alone wouldn’t be enough of a decoy and that brought me to my senses. I realized he was absolutely right, so I had to prepare something that would function as a proper decoy or else we would all be killed. And then…well…as I said before, I had no choice.” With that casual response, Heivia glanced around. “Now then, my princess and her knight. It looks like we can’t stick around here much longer.”

“…?”

Quenser frowned, but he realized what Heivia meant shortly thereafter.

Heivia’s false courage was hiding his fear of the distantly approaching thundercloud-like noise that the Object made as it moved.

“Let’s go! You made quite a racket when you shot and killed those soldiers. Their Object must have noticed and is heading this way!!”

Heivia’s cry ended the heart-warming scene.

They had returned to hell.

The life-and-death game of tag with the over 50 meter Object had begun anew.

“Shit!! Where are we supposed to go!?”

The deep snow grabbed at his feet as he moved, but Quenser desperately kept moving. In response, Heivia shouted out as loudly as he could as if to rid himself of his fear.

“You need to memorize the map of the area you’re gonna be fighting in!! There’s a cave about 50 meters ahead. If we can get in there, we can escape from that giant Object!!”

Fifty meters.

That was a distance they could manage in 10 seconds even when fully equipped if they were on a paved surface.

However, the deep snow robbed them of their speed and the enemy Object used static electricity to smoothly approach around the slopes of the mountain. Its movements made it look like the surface below it was sliding it along.

It was about 3 kilometers away, but that was nothing to that giant weapon.

“It’s aiming the plasma cannons this way!!” shouted the Elite girl.

(With that Object’s aiming devices, there’s no way it can’t shoot us at that distance. Are they still not sure whether they want to capture the princess alive or not?)

The distance to the cave felt strangely long.

(It’s true that they might be able to get some classified information related to our Object out of her if they tortured her, but this response is inconsistent with the soldiers from before!!)

He thought his legs were going to cramp up due to fear, but he had no choice but to continue running.

“Hey, Quenser. You’re a combat engineer, right!? Do you have any explosives!?”

“I have about 5 kilograms of normal C4!”

“What!? Isn’t 10 kilos the standard equipment!?”

“I felt silly carrying around useless explosives around the clock! And what I have is meant for civil engineering uses! It won’t work against an Object!!”

“Give it to me! Just hurry up and hand it over!! And a fuse too!!”

As they approached the entrance to the cave, Quenser tossed over a clay-like mass about the size of a can of hairspray. The bomb was inside a package of clear film and Heivia set the receiver for the detonation signal through the film before stabbing the electric fuse into it. He then tossed it right next to the cave.

The main weapons of the approaching Object, the low-stability plasma cannons, slowly aimed toward them.

However, Heivia leapt into the cave before they could spew flames and Quenser followed. The Elite girl’s foot got caught in the snow and she started to trip, but she managed to turn it into a roll that brought her into the cave.

Quenser frantically caught the Elite girl before shouting at Heivia.

“Hey, what are we gonna do!? If it fires its plasma cannons into the cave, we’ll be cooked to death!! No matter how much this cave branches apart, all the air inside will be heated up to the point that the entire cave will be an oven!!”

“That’s what the C4’s for! Now, outta the way!! Get deeper inside!!”

Heivia urged them on and Quenser headed further inside the cave while half-dragging the Elite girl. After heading about 10 meters in, Quenser had a thought.

What was Heivia planning to do with the C4?

He may have been planning to detonate it when the Object was right up against the entrance to the cave, but Quenser doubted that would do any damage to it. After all, the Object’s armor could withstand a direct hit from a nuclear missile or two with no real issues.

“Sorry, I decided to test our luck from the beginning.”

Immediately afterwards, Heivia hit the switch for the wireless detonation device.

With a tremendous roar, the roof of the cave collapsed, sealing off the entrance.

It was true that he was testing their luck.

First of all, he had just buried them alive if there was no other exit.

Second of all, the compressed explosive blast flowed into the cave.

Thanks to that, Quenser felt as if his eardrums were going to burst.

Part 12

They came across a branch in the cave after travelling down it a bit and found a different exit shortly after that. After exiting the cave, the three of them buried the exit in snow. They actually wanted to blow it up with C4, but the blast could have easily drawn the Object to them.

The giant Object could not enter the cave, so flesh-and-blood soldiers would likely be sent to search for them. They wanted the enemy to think they were still hiding in the cave.

Quenser and the others hid in a conifer forest outside the cave. Quenser had thought there was no way hiding behind the trees would do anything to keep out the cold in that freezing land, but merely being protected from the winter wind did wonders for his body temperature.

While munching on a ration that tasted like an uncooked rice cake made of an eraser, Quenser looked over toward the cave entrance.

“Well, it doesn’t look like they’ve been able to figure out where we went.”

“I can still hear that low, thunder-like roar, so the Object must still be near,” said the Elite girl as she strained her ears and brought a small ration to her mouth with both hands.

Hearing that, Quenser focused on the distant noise as well.

“Most likely, dealing with the Elite that can pilot an Object takes top priority for them. It probably won’t leave until the search is over.”

That also meant their fleeing comrades would not be slaughtered until Quenser and the others were found or the enemy gave up the search.

Heivia still had the heavy-looking but useless portable anti-tank

missile hanging from his shoulder.

“Hey, since the enemy’s lost sight of us, can’t we survive if we take this chance to disappear?”

“Maybe, but that would just lead to our side being slaughtered as they climb the mountain,” Quenser said.

“Shit!” Heivia cursed.

The Elite girl nibbled on the corner of the square ration and said, “But do you really think we can safely continue to act as a decoy until they get away?”

“We’d definitely die if we did that. If an enemy soldier so much as catches a glimpse of us, they’ll call the Object and have it send some concentrated fire our way from its plasma cannons! Even just darting out to act as a decoy is out of the question!!”

“Then are you saying we just leave!?”

“Yes!! I just said we should do just that!! Not even the princess’s Object could stand up to that monster! How the hell are we supposed to do anything!?”

The princess hung her head down at the mention of her defeat.

“…That was because the device suddenly started to activate. It took a bit of time to cancel that mode and that Object attacked while I was trying to do so.”

“The device? Oh, the security device.”

Basically, it was a self-destruct device. The Object was a giant mass of military secrets, so there had to be a means of ensuring it did not fall into enemy hands. If its sensors detected that it could no longer function even if it had not taken serious damage, the princess’s Object would seal the special gas for its low-stability plasma cannons in the space between the armor and the reactor and then detonate it.

“That doesn’t matter. Don’t try to escape the problem before your

eyes with idle chatter! We need to come up with a way of dealing with that damn water strider!!"

"Are you still thinking of running away? You may survive, but you'll be traumatized for the rest of your life! You're a noble, right? Being the sole survivor here will be seen as a disgrace for you. You won't get to be the next head of your family and your life will head into a downward spiral faster than you can imagine!"

"…!? Then what the fuck am I supposed to do!?"

"At this rate, you'll either die here on the battlefield or back in the home country! If you don't want that, then we need to do something about that thing!!"

The three of them fell silent now that they were faced with the obvious question of "How?"

Quenser tossed the last piece of his flavorless ration into his mouth.

He looked at the other two's faces and had a sudden thought.

"I'm a student who's studying to be an Object designer, you're an analyst who searches for things that could lead to a winning strategy against Objects, and you're an Elite who pilots an Object. With the three of us…"

"Hey, you're kidding right. I have a feeling I know what you're thinking, but please tell me you're kidding."

"…We have no choice but to try to find one, right?" said Quenser with the stiff expression characteristic of someone who was truly cornered. "We need to find some kind of weakness in that supposedly unbeatable Object."

And so, Quenser and the other two circled around the slope of the mountain on foot, heading back to the cave entrance they had blown up with C4.

He hid among the deep snow and held his rifle out through gaps

between the trees.

He was not preparing to shoot an enemy.

He was using the scope in place of binoculars.

Quenser was looking at the Object, so the rifle would not be much use anyway.

“(…Hey, don’t hit the infrared switch. If it notices the exposure, it’ll blow us away with those plasma cannons.)”

Heivia was lying down next to him and giving him unnecessary warnings. That was just how nervous he was.

Not that that was surprising.

They were about 300 meters from the Object, but if it noticed them, there would be no escaping. They would merely be mercilessly slaughtered. Just hearing the thundercloud-like roar spreading through the ground was enough to make them tense up with fear.

“(…What is that Object doing?)”

“(…Searching with its radar? …No. It might be able to find a tank or fighter with that, but I doubt it can locate people with it.)”

“(…It appears to be trying to access a satellite. However, it is not going well because the signal cannot get through,)” added the Elite girl.

“(…Oh, that’s right. A chaff missile was fired as a meteorological weapon. It scattered signal-blocking particles in the clouds which turned the natural clouds into giant anti-satellite shields.)”

If the Object could use the satellite, they could be found in an instant. Quenser was now immensely thankful for that waste of tax money.

“Okay, let’s review what we know,” he said while staring through the rifle scope.

Heivia stared at the Object through the sight of the anti-tank missile and forced his tone to remain light.

“The enemy’s Object is codenamed Water Strider. Oh, and that’s just our codename for it. We have no idea what name they developed it under.”

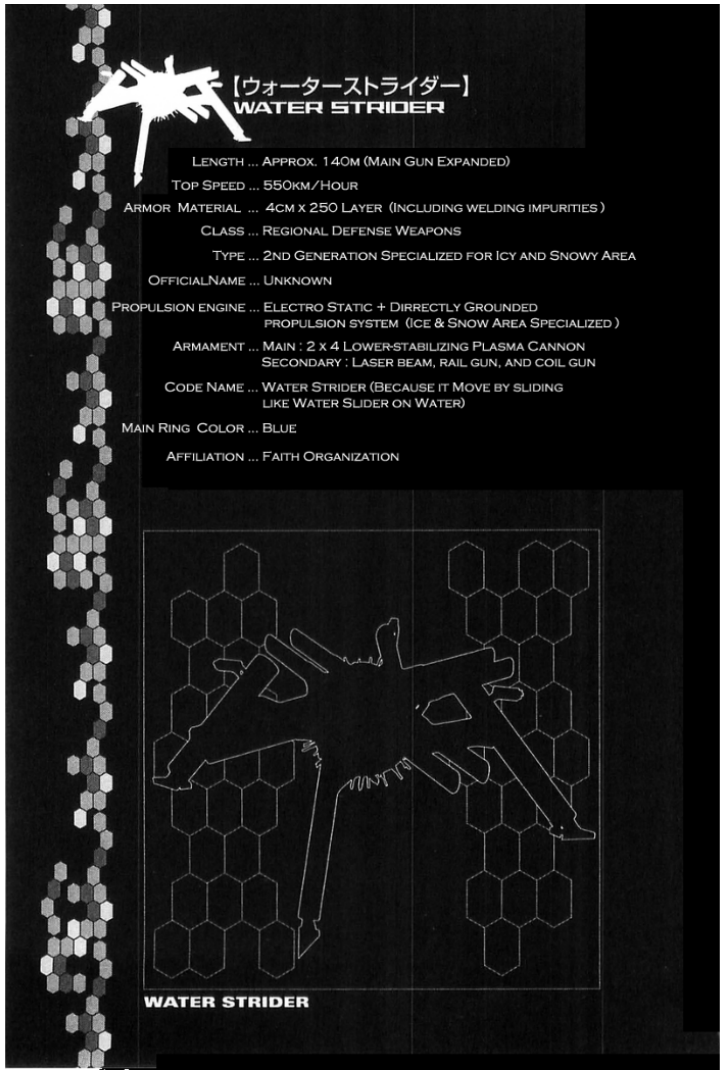
“The name comes from those legs,” said the Elite girl crouching next to Quenser while she stared at the Water Strider with her naked eyes.

Quenser moved the rifle to look at the Object’s legs.

The main body of the Water Strider was a giant sphere. Four insect-like legs extended from there and to the ground.

It moved by gliding rather than walking. It slid along the ground just as a water strider moved across water, and thus it received that codename.

“It seems to slide along the ground using static electricity. It’s basically the same as yours, princess, but with those four legs, it can regulate itself to move smoothly across much rougher surfaces,” said Quenser while especially focusing on the very bottom of its legs.


【ウォーターストライダー】
WATER STRIDER
LENGTH ... APPROX. 140M (MAIN GUN EXPANDED)
TOP SPEED ... 550KM/HOUR
ARMOR MATERIAL ... 4CM X 250 LAYER (INCLUDING WELDING IMPURITIES)
CLASS ... REGIONAL DEFENSE WEAPONS
TYPE ... 2ND GENERATION SPECIALIZED FOR ICY AND SNOWY AREA
OFFICIALNAME ... UNKNOWN
PROPULSION ENGINE ... ELECTRO STATIC + DIRRECTLY GROUNDED PROPULSION SYSTEM (ICE & SNOW AREA SPECIALIZED)
ARMAMENT ... MAIN : 2 X 4 LOWER-STABILIZING PLASMA CANNON
SECONDARY : LASER BEAM, RAIL GUN, AND COIL GUN
CODE NAME ... WATER STRIDER (BECAUSE IT MOVE BY SLIDING LIKE WATER SLIDER ON WATER)
MAIN RING COLOR ... BLUE
AFFILIATION ... FAITH ORGANIZATION
WATER STRIDER

The princess continued for him.

“The static electricity is only used to make the heavy Object float. It uses a different means to propel itself forward. For mine, it uses lasers to detonate the air, but the Water Strider uses its legs to directly kick off of the ground.”

In that aspect, the Water Strider truly moved like a real water strider. However, high-level calculations and minute adjustments

must have been made instantaneously to ensure the Object's weight did not become focused on a single leg which would crush it. It actually had to use a method where the legs only just barely touched the ground as they kicked off of it.

After thinking through all that, Quenser continued his explanation.

"Basically, the static electricity method is a relative of hovercrafts that blow air down to float on the surface of the water. Instead of destroying the Object, can't we dig up the earth beneath its legs? If there's enough of a difference in ground level, the power keeping it afloat will cease to be equally distributed and it might not be able to slide along anymore."

"It can still walk using its four legs if it has to. If one leg is stuck, it can just pull it out. That may stop it for about 10 seconds, but it wouldn't be enough to stop it from functioning," explained Heivia. "Also, its plasma cannons and all its other firepower will still be active even if we do stop its legs. We'll only have turned a mobile gun battery into a stationary one. Once it realizes we're approaching to destroy its legs, it'll blow us to pieces in no time at all. It might work if we were willing to die in order save Froleytia and the others, but I'd honestly rather not die like that."

"In that case…" The Elite girl moved her gaze from the Water Strider's legs to the main weapons attached at the top. "Can we make the enemy misfire? If only an Object can destroy an Object, then if we used the Object's own power…"

"Maybe if we had our own Object, but this tiny missile can't even scratch its cannons."

Heivia lightly struck his portable missile as if it were trash.

They could not destroy the legs or cannons.

That only left…

"So we'll have to deal with the main body." Quenser looked at the giant sphere through the scope. "But isn't that the toughest target of them all? A nuclear shelter-like wall surrounds the giant reactor.

How are we supposed to get through that?”

“Hey, we had spare parts for our Object, right? Were there any spares of the main weapons for the princess’s Object in there? Only the firepower of an Object can destroy an Object, so this could work if we have one of its cannons, right?”

“Do you know how much of an output an Object’s reactor has?” Quenser shook his head with a bitter expression on his face. “It produces enough energy to have energy to spare while firing over 100 weapons that would not receive sufficient energy from a standard nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. Those reactors are crystallizations of human technology. They are handmade by about 300 technicians with skills that not even precision machinery can match. Where are you planning to get an energy source to replace that reactor?” Quenser continued giving flaws in Heivia’s suggestion. “And even if we did have a reactor to use, those weapons are meant to be fired while attached to a 50 meters, 20 ton Object. The shockwave from firing the railguns or coilguns might be enough to kill us if we fired them and the radiant heat from the laser or plasma weapons could turn us into human torches. …Actually, a low-stability plasma cannon would probably shoot off like a rocket if we fired one.”

“I was just thinking out loud, dammit. And that damn Water Strider made sure to destroy all the maintenance facilities from our base to crush even the slimmest possibility of something like that.”

However, the two of them both stopped speaking there.

“Wait a second.”

“Yeah.”

The Elite girl looked confused as the two guys took their eyes from the scopes and exchanged glances.

“Even if we can’t destroy the Object itself, their base zone is still run by soldiers.”

“That monster is still a weapon, so it’ll stop moving if it doesn’t

receive regular maintenance, won't it?"

Quenser and the other two moved far away from the Water Strider and headed down the mountain slope. The three of them came up behind the Water Strider's maintenance base zone.

They were inside a rusted metal tower.

It had likely been set up as a watchtower while the base zone was being constructed and the radars had yet to be set up. It seemed to have been abandoned since the base zone had been completed, so Quenser and the others made use of it.

While hiding behind the bulletproof metal panels attached to the watchtower, they looked out into the distance where the enemy maintenance base zone spread out before them. The base appeared to be about 500 meters square.

"…Hey, did you notice it?" whispered Heivia as they looked out at the base zone.

"Yeah, it has a lot of radar facilities. In fact, the base is mostly made up of radars."

Most of the buildings made of thick concrete were either maintenance areas for the Water Strider or radar facilities for supporting the Object. It had almost no normal military force outside of the Object. The base had been constructed based on the theory that Objects were synonymous with war and therefore everything should be focused on it.

"Not only are there no tanks or fighters, but there aren't even any armored vehicles or soldier transport vehicles. The few vehicles scattered about all look like tractors for plowing the snow."

"I guess they made everything either for Object maintenance or radar in order to cut down on unneeded maintenance costs for the inspecting of the other vehicles."

"It's true that spending taxes on maintaining outdated tanks seems pretty ridiculous…"

Most likely, the only military force outside of the Object at the enemy base zone was infantry. And speaking of the infantry…

“I guess this isn’t too surprising,” muttered Quenser. “A student who had never actually held a gun before couldn’t take out four real soldiers. Those were probably just maintenance workers. They didn’t expect to have to capture an Elite like that, so they had to hurriedly throw together a team of noncombat maintenance soldiers to go after her.”

“Whether they were trained or not, those were still horrible bastards you killed. This doesn’t change the fact that you’re the knight that saved the princess,” said Heivia lightly.

Their moods had improved quite a bit just by getting some distance away from the object even if it was only temporarily.

“However, if they had to send maintenance soldiers to the front lines, it’s probably safe to assume they don’t have many normal soldiers. If we could just get rid of that gigantic Object, Froleytia and the others fleeing might be enough to take them out.”

“The problem is what to do about that Object,” said the Elite girl.

Quenser looked at the largest facility in the base zone that was likely the maintenance facility.

“? …It looks like the roof and walls can open.”

“Well, their only means of fighting is the Object. It’d be a major problem if they were attacked while it was being serviced. I’m betting they made sure some of the cannons can still function while it’s undergoing maintenance so they can intercept any attack.”

“But if the Object is still running, how can they service it?”

“The Water Strider has over 100 weapons, so they’ll still have 50 left over even if they stop half of them for maintenance. That way, they have a minimum number active at all times.”

Quenser looked back at the base zone as a whole while listening to Heivia.

"…So what should we blow up?" Quenser asked his comrades in arms while thinking about the structure of the various buildings. "What would cause them the most problems if it was destroyed?"

"You already know, don't you? The legs. There has to be a storage area or something that holds the spare parts for the Water Strider's legs."

"?"

The Elite girl looked confused, but Quenser nodded in agreement.

"Even with that giant form floating, quite a bit of stress has to be put on the legs. It's bad enough with a giant flat surface like with a hovercraft and its using just the ends of those four legs."

"According to our battle records, that damn water strider always goes back to its base for maintenance once every 12 hours. Most likely, it's getting an overhaul for those 'glass slippers' on its feet. Constantly producing enough energy to make that giant thing float must melt the metal parts."

"My Object uses static electricity too, but it can go half a year without replacing the parts. I remember because it is generally replaced with the attached box that holds the compressed exhaust gases from the JPlevelMHD reactor."

"That's due to the effective area, don't you think? The flat floating surface at the bottom of the upside down Y-shape undercarriage is a few dozen meters across, so the burden on any one point isn't too great. However, that Water Strider floats from only the ends of the four legs, so it gets worn down much faster. That's what makes the vast difference between having to replace the parts every half day or every half year."

"…Since it's a half day, does that mean the Water Strider would chase after us for another 12 hours even if we destroy the facility?"

"Sure, if it had just replaced its 'glass slippers' with new ones. It's been a while since it last replaced them and it had to have been putting more stress on its legs than usual while fighting the

princess's Object. I'd say its undercarriage must be pretty burnt out by now. In fact, it's surprising it hasn't headed back to the base yet."

"So if we blow up those spare parts…" muttered the girl.

"It won't be able to replace them. The Object will burn out its legs and no longer be able to move. Even if it does force itself to continue moving like that, the tough barrier walls will melt its system from within."

"We can't destroy the Object itself, but we'll be able to run away from the threat."

"That means we need to think of a way to sneak into the base," said the Elite girl.

Quenser and Heivia looked over at the short princess and she continued speaking.

"As an Elite that pilots an Object, I have an idea how we can sneak through their radar net."

Part 13

The only explosives they had on hand were the C4 for destroying bridges or rock and the portable anti-tank missile.

Quenser and Heivia headed down from the watchtower and headed for the enemy's Object maintenance base zone.

"…Should we really have left the princess behind?"

"All three of us going wouldn't have helped any. If the Water Strider returns while we're working, we need to escape from the base, so leaving a lookout behind like this is best."

"Hah. Give me a break, Sir Knight. Even if rank and file soldiers like us are captured, there's a chance they'll keep the treaty and treat us as prisoners of war. However, an Elite would clearly be different. She'll either be brutally tortured to get classified information on our Object or shot on the spot to destroy our army's ability to fight at the root. You were just making sure she could still flee if we fucked this up."

"Like I said: this is best."

As Quenser trudged through the snow, a smile appeared on his lips.

Due to the cold, it was a stiff, awkward smile, but it was a natural smile all the same.

"You certainly have cheered up," he said to Heivia.

"Of course I have. Charging into an enemy base with some scrawny bastard is so much better than being chased around by that monstrous Object."

They had recovered mentally enough that jokes and sarcasm now came to them naturally once more.

They eventually reached the barricade at the back of the base. The enemy base zone was surrounded by a long net made of synthetic

fiber, but it did not appear to have any sensors attached.

“What do you think? Should we climb over?”

“No, you idiot. The guards will definitely notice us if we climb two meters up. We need to cut a hole in the barricade,” Heivia whispered as he pulled a knife from his waist.

He used the large blade to cut through the synthetic fibers weaved into the barricade one at a time.

It took a while and they were worried a patrolling soldier would notice them, but one never did. It seemed they truly did leave everything to the Object.

“Let’s go.”

“Hey, where do you think the spare parts for the legs are stored?” asked Quenser as he slipped through the hole in the barricade.

It seemed like thick concrete buildings were placed here and there throughout the wide area of the base zone. A lot of them were large antenna facilities for assisting the Object. The area between buildings was unusually large either so an intruder could be spotted from the watchtowers or so the giant Object could pass through without obstruction.

Heivia answered while hiding behind the nearest building.

“I don’t know, but the Object has to be overhauled every half day. It’s probably the place the most people go to and from.”

“By the way, how long has it been since the Water Strider last started moving?”

“It should be coming back soon, so we need to blow up those spare parts before it does.”

If they could keep the Water Strider from being serviced on, it would be stuck at the base zone. However, if it was successfully overhauled, it could move around freely for another 12 hours. If that happened, their fleeing superiors and fellow soldiers would be

slaughtered for sure.

Quenser used the scope of his rifle to look at the surrounding facilities and found one building that had a lot more footprints in the snow leading to its entrance than any other. The snowstorms made footprints disappear, but the white snow was a dirty mud color in that area alone. He could see footprints from 100 to 200 people as well as tire and tread tracks from a few heavy vehicles.

“That building isn’t big enough to fit the Object inside.”

“So are those footprints and tracks from taking the spare parts from there to the maintenance facility?”

“It might just be a popular strip club on the base. If so, we’re gonna end up in a firefight with 100 idiots pitching tents in their pants.”

Quenser used his rifle’s scope to look at the watchtowers at the four corners of the base zone, but the parabolic antennae of the many large radar facilities that had been built later blocked the view of any guards who might be in them. Once again, the Object took priority. At any rate, it looked like they were not going to be caught that way if they ran through the base zone.

Quenser and Heivia charged out from behind the building and ran across a wide open area of snow.

It only took 10 seconds to cross, but they thought their hearts were going to stop.

No gunshots from a sniper in the watchtowers were heard.

They pressed up against the wall of the storehouse.

“Let’s go in the back way. Do you know how to open an electronic lock?”

“If we have to, we can use the C4 to blow open the door.”

“That’s a great idea. If only it wouldn’t bring every soldier in the base to us.”

As Quenser and Heivia spoke back and forth, they circled around to the back entrance and found it unlocked.

"…I guess they decided there was no chance they would have human intruders."

"And I thought having guards was a waste of money back at our base…"

They opened the small door and entered the storehouse.

The building was 50 meters wide, 100 meters long, and 15 meters tall. It was simply a large open area with no inner walls. Metal beams ran vertically and horizontally through the area. The metal framework was highly regular and created something that looked like giant bookshelves from a library.

And those bookshelves were lined with cylindrical parts.

The cylinders had a diameter of about a meter and a length of about 5 meters, making them look something like a fighter aircraft's engine. From Quenser's knowledge of Objects, he guessed they were the devices that created the massive amounts of static electricity by spinning the turbines.

"My guess is this is part of the undercarriage, but…"

"Yeah, at my station, we were analyzing the battle records and trying to come up with an expected design of the enemy Object. I'm pretty sure a part similar to this was drawn in the predicted diagram," agreed Heivia.

Quenser looked at the side of the cylindrical turbines where a number was written. It was most likely a simple spec for the electrical power it used, but…

"…What the hell? Is this decimal point in the wrong place? If this is accurate, then it's more than twice what I'm guessing the value is for the plasma cannons."

"To keep such a large body afloat and moving at such high speeds, they have to go all out like that. The electrical simulation group

estimates that each leg uses around 10 of these turbines."

"Twenty times the power of a plasma cannon? And for just one leg?"

"Look," said Heivia as he opened the maintenance cover of the turbine and peered inside. "The thing is jammed full of sensors. It almost looks like those horrible time bombs you see in movies. These are all for extremely sensitive security. They have to make sure they can predict ahead of time if control of one of these high output turbines is going to be lost so they can shut it down ahead of time."

"…Come to think of it, I think I heard something about the turbines melting if they continually created energy."

"It's too late by the time they melt," said Heivia. "Just because the turbine stops functioning does not mean the energy produced by the reactor is going to just disappear. The reactor and the legs have a few emergency transformers and discharge devices installed, but the amount of power they would have to get rid of would be orders of magnitude greater than what those can deal with. If all the turbines packed into a single leg went out, that would be 20 times the output of one of its plasma cannons. I'm betting the transformers and discharge devices wouldn't even be able to function if the turbines actually melted and ceased to function. The devices would be blown to pieces."

That was why the turbines had so many sensors installed. If they could predict a failure early, they could actually deal with the excess energy by discharging it in stages.

"Its functionality may be optimized…but the Water Strider's design just forces a lot of things through, doesn't it?"

"That's just one aspect to creating an Object specialized for this snowy region. One like our princess's that was designed to be almighty in any situation and the Water Strider that only works in Alaska may both be Objects, but they were developed with completely different ideas in mind," said Heivia. "Deep snow can slow you down, so an Object that can move around quickly is a

major advantage. …And that was what did our princess in."

However, if the turbines could not be replaced, Quenser and the others would be victorious.

If the static electricity producer in the Water Strider's undercarriage was destroyed, it could not be overhauled and then the enemy Object would be stuck.

And they had C4 they could use to carry that out.

But…

Part 14

Within the watchtower a short distance from the maintenance base zone, the Elite girl waited for Quenser and Heivia's return.

Suddenly, her ears twitched and she frantically turned around.

She had heard the dark thundercloud-like noise the Water Strider made when it moved using massive amounts of static electricity. It had likely started back toward its base zone because its time limit was drawing near.

If it ran across the other two in the base zone, they would surely be killed.

The girl had been handed a radio for just such a situation. If it came to it, she was to contact Quenser and Heivia so they could get away. Their plan would fail, but they would keep their lives. If the plan to destroy the Object's undercarriage had to be ended, they would just have to come up with some other way.

The Elite girl reached for the radio's switch, but suddenly stopped.

(…Not good.)

She audibly gulped.

The enemy base zone was made up of maintenance facilities for the Object and large radio facilities to support the Object. They were likely used to more efficiently locate the enemy in a snowstorm, but if she used a radio so near a base with that many precision radars…

(They would definitely notice. Not only would they locate me, but they might even realize the signal was being sent toward the base…)

The radio was supposed to let her warn them of danger, but the transmission itself would bring danger on them.

However, she could not tell them the Object was approaching

without the radio.

The Water Strider continued to approach the base zone.

(What do I do?)

The Elite girl looked down at the radio.

She did not want those two to die. This was not an issue of being duty bound to protect the other soldiers as the Elite of an Object. Beyond such sworn duty, she simply did not want those who had stood up to protect her to die in vain.

Comrades in arms.

When that term appeared in her mind, the Elite girl nodded.

(The enemy's top priority is the Elite that pilots the Object…)

She took a deep breath and then stared intently at the giant weapon.

That was her only chance to act as a decoy.

Part 15

With C4 in hand, Quenser's expression turned bitter.

"…What are we supposed to do?" he muttered in a trembling voice.

The maintenance parts for the Object were just the precision equipment with no outer shell, so C4 was more than enough to destroy them.

However…

"There's just too many of them. The amount of C4 I have isn't enough!!"

The vast space within the building was packed almost completely full of the cylindrical parts. Quenser gritted his teeth at the overly cautious amount they had prepared.

Objects were synonymous with war.

Everyone on that base would be slaughtered if the Object ceased to function.

The massive amount of parts showed how afraid they were of that happening. The enemies were cowardly enough to leave all the killing to the Object, but they were well aware of its weaknesses.

Heivia was taken aback in the same way and he tapped Quenser's shoulder.

"Hey, let's just blow up the entire building. Even if we can't blow up each individual part, we can crush it all under the rubble if we destroy one of the building's main support pillars!!"

"Do you have any way of being sure that every single one of these thousands of parts will be unusable afterwards? And even if each individual part is unusable, they might be able to scavenge enough working components to put together a usable one!"

“But that’s-…! No, you’re right. The continued operation of the Object is a matter of life or death for them. It wouldn’t surprise me if they were that persistent. But what else are we supposed to do!?”

“Shit!!” Quenser swore and ran through the storehouse.

He looked at each of the shelves made of the metal framework to see if he could find any useful information. As he read the displays, his impatience increased, preventing him from actually comprehending any of it.

At the same time, Heivia glanced toward the exit.

“Hey, this is dangerous. We should really finish up in here! If we can’t take out the Object’s undercarriage, there’s no point in staying any longer!! We need to get out of here!!”

“Wait just a bit longer!! There has to be something!!” replied Quenser as he flipped through a turbine maintenance manual he had found.

When he then heard a low sound like thunderclouds spreading across the sky, he thought his heart would stop.

It was the sound of the Water Strider moving.

“Oh, shit!! Why didn’t the princess warn us over the radio!?” Heivia yelled, but Quenser paid him no heed.

After coming that far, they would die a vain death if they did not retaliate in some way.

(Wait a second. This combination of a four level sensor and automatic switch…)

Quenser looked back and forth between the maintenance manual and the shelves.

(What’s the number!? If I know the leading number…!!)

“Time’s up, hero!! If we don’t get out of here in 30 seconds, we’ll be trapped!!”

“Give me one more minute!!”

“What are you messing around with!? Didn’t you conclude we couldn’t blow them up!?”

“45 more seconds!!”

Heivia heard a great number of footsteps approaching. Quenser had likely lost his ability to make rational decision due to the hope he thought he saw before him. Just as Heivia was thinking of kicking Quenser’s ass to make him leave, Quenser finally returned to Heivia.

“Let’s go. Can we still make it!?”

“Because of some idiot wasting time it’s gonna be pretty thrilling, but hopefully! This way!!” Heivia said as he ran toward the back entrance.

He opened the door a crack and peered outside just in time to see the giant Object cut across nearby. It was likely headed for the maintenance area. The maintenance soldiers were following behind it.

“Can we make it?”

“It’ll be like cutting across a bee hive, but we won’t get another chance. The radar facilities will be on highest alert when the Object is undergoing maintenance. We need to get out of the base before they switch over the mode.”

They then heard a clanking noise.

It was not coming from the back entrance. The personnel door next to the giant shutter on the front was opening.

“Dammit, let’s go!”

Quenser and Heivia were almost pushing each other as they charged out of the storehouse.

It seemed the enemy army had lowered its guard quite a bit since

the Object they felt was the sole threat had been destroyed. A great number people were gathered around the returning Water Strider as if it were a triumphant parade.

“Hey, you aren’t going to be using that C4, right? Stick fuses in it and throw it all over the area.”

“Are you going to use it as a diversion?”

“Once that damn Water Strider’s maintenance is done, we’re going to need some kind of plan to buy us enough time to escape. If they get a report of explosions all over their base, they might assume it’s being bombarded and turn the Object back to deal with it!!”

Quenser went along with Heivia’s idea and tossed the small pieces of C4 around as he ran. It was true that they were not going to need the C4.

After ridding themselves of all the C4, they headed back for the hole they had cut in the barricade.

That was when Quenser noticed something.

He suddenly stopped.

“What’s wrong, hero!? Did you leave something behind!?”

“Yeah! The princess has been captured!!”

Heivia’s expression turned to one of shock upon seeing the serious look on Quenser’s face.

They headed behind a nearby building rather than for the hole in the barricade and then peered around the side so they could see the center of the base zone.

In the distance, they could see the Elite girl in handcuffs being forced to walk near the Water Strider. Their triumphant mood had not simply been due to the return of the Object. They were in high spirits because they now had a chance to lynch the person who had been threatening their lives.

Quenser looked back and forth between the hole in the barricade and the Elite girl in the center of the base zone.

“God dammit. What are we supposed to do!?” he asked.

“*What are we supposed to do*…? Oh, no. While I admit you’re a knight, you can’t possibly be thinking of trying to save her in this situation!”

“So we should just abandon her!? I’m not saying we have to take on the Object. We just scattered that C4 around, remember!? If we can confuse the enemy with that, there might be enough of an opening to save her!!”

“With just the two of us!? They have their Object. And even if they didn’t, how many soldiers do you see out there!? Do you know just how many reinforcements we would need to break through all of them!?”

“But without the Object, things would be different, right?”

“What?”

“If we can take out the Water Strider, we could manage with normal reinforcements like tanks or fighters, right!?”

Quenser gritted his teeth and operated the radio in his hand.

He was not detonating the C4.

He was trying to contact Froleytia and the other fleeing soldiers, but Heivia frantically grabbed his hand upon realizing that.

“You idiot!! Their base is mainly radar facilities! If you send out a radio signal, they’ll find us in no time at all!!”

“But…!!”

“There’s nothing we can do. Even if we could contact Froleytia and the others, do you really think they’d come!?”

“So we should just abandon the princess!? Do you remember why

we split up with the main force and came here in the first place!? It was because we couldn't abandon her!"

"Dammit," Heivia said and quietly clicked his tongue.

He seemed to hesitate over something, but finally made up his mind and spoke.

"My military instructor taught me a secret trick back when I was trained."

"?"

"If you raise the output of the infrared seeker on an 8th generation portable anti-tank missile as far as it will go, make a few special modifications to the aiming computer, and then connect it to the radio's port, the high power military satellite will pick up the infrared signal, completing the transmission."

"Wait, you mean…!!"

"But there's no guarantee those in control of the radio facilities here won't notice a trick like this and the chaff missile shot in to the clouds is obstructing any transmissions or signals. The instructor who taught me this said it should only be used as a last resort to get an SOS out. It'll be a miracle if the transmission lasts even for a whole minute."

As he practically spat out that explanation, Heivia put down the missile and started making the necessary preparations. Quenser removed the cover to the missile's aiming computer.

"Do you know where and when the satellite is going to pass by overhead?"

"Look at the timetable in File 399 on your handheld device. If it's on its standard orbit, you should be able to check it there without having to check online."

Heivia connected the radio and portable anti-tank missile with a cable and slowly moved the barrel through the sky based on the data on Quenser's handheld device. As he did, a bit of static ran

through the radio's speakers.

"There, Heivia. …Okay, it looks like we've got the satellite."

"Hurry up and secure the transmission line and then connect to Froleytia's laser satellite communication device! I have no idea how long this manual method will last!!"

Despite the jury rigged method, they were using the proper military code, so the satellite actually relayed their signal. After getting the signal indicating the access had been a success, Quenser spoke into the radio.

"This is Quenser. Can you hear me, Froleytia? We are currently near the enemy base zone!!"

"…!?"

They heard the sound of someone's breath catching in their throat come from the radio.

Due to forcing the signal through with the portable anti-tank missile, the signal had a lot of noise mixed in. The static was louder than the voices, but they could barely manage to get their words across to each other.

"The princess was captured by the soldiers at the base. We are about to go save her. Could you lend us a hand? The base is mostly made up of Object maintenance facilities and radar facilities, so they basically have no tanks or fighters. If we can do something about the Object, we can easily defeat them!!"

"Do you know how dangerous that Object is? Give up on the princess. There is no need for you to die and, Quenser, you aren't even an actual soldier. No one will blame you if you run away!!"

"We will deal with the Object," said Quenser plainly. No one thought his words could be anything but a bluff. "Froleytia, you can wait until you see the large flash of the Object blowing up, but the instant you think we could win at least send a single tank our way! That alone could completely change this situation. Please consider it!!"

“Okay, but I wouldn’t get your hopes up if I were you.”

“I’m free to get my hopes up over whatever I want,” Quenser said before switching off the radio.

He then turned toward Heivia.

He forced down the trembling of his body and said, “Now we’ve done everything we can.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think there’s really any chance of Froleytia coming back. For one thing, your request was not based on military regulations. She isn’t going to put her subordinates and units in danger for that.”

“Now we just need to resolve everything by praying for a miracle and destroying the Object on our own.”

“Don’t say that like it’s easy. And I never said a single word about helping you save the princess.”

“I see.”

Quenser did not speak ill of Heivia for wanting to flee. He had forcibly gotten him involved before, but there was no guarantee they would survive the next time. Also, what Quenser was going to do next was not a proper military action. In fact, he was thankful that Heivia had stuck around as long as he had.

“…Sorry for making you tag along for all this. You leave through the hole in the barricade and escape into the forest over there. I’ll do everything I can to draw their attention while you do.”

“Wait, damn you. Don’t leave me with some horrible trauma! You’re not going to give me any choice are you!?”

Heivia was still stubbornly glancing back toward the hole in the barricade, but when Quenser dashed out from behind the building and headed for his next piece of cover, Heivia chased after him.

Quenser and Heivia headed out alone on a mission that had almost no chance of succeeding.

And of course, no miracle occurred.

After only 10 minutes, they were spotted, warning shots were fired at the ground near their feet by a sniper, and they ended up surrendering with their hands raised above their heads.

Part 16

Quenser, Heivia, and the Elite girl were brought to the center of the maintenance base zone. They were ordered to kneel down and put their hands behind their heads.

A soldier was placed behind each of them, holding a gun to their heads. A ring of people from the base zone had appeared to watch their public execution.

“Such a sad story, isn’t it? This is such a good example of a knight returning to save the princess.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“Oh, shit. The Object is entering the maintenance area.”

As Heivia and the Elite girl spoke back and forth, Quenser remained silent and watched the Water Strider slowly move along.

“(…If I create some confusion, do you think we can get away?)”

“(…Ahhn? You mean the C4 we scattered about? If that somehow blew up the Object, we might make it somehow.)”

“(…I’m serious here.)”

“(…So am I.)”

Meanwhile, one of the enemy soldiers stepped forward and stood before Quenser and the others. While chewing on some gum, he spat some yellow saliva at Quenser’s head.

“We’re gonna roast you with the Object’s main weapons.” He then turned toward the Elite girl. “For you, we’re gonna use suggestion and electrodes to pull out everything in your head. Your personality will never recover, but it’ll all be over in about 30 minutes. Afterwards, we’ll strip you naked and hang you from the main weapons until you freeze to death. Maybe the savages running through the woods and mountains will give up once they see that.”

“…So you don’t care about the war treaties relating to prisoners of war. I think I know who the real savages are here, you fucker.”

Heivia let that comment slip and immediately afterwards he had a thick leather military boot fly at his cheek. It struck him and he sank down into the snow. As he coughed, he glared at the enemy soldier with a powerful light in his eyes.

“The maintenance is complete, so it’s time for the execution,” the enemy soldier said mockingly.

With a great noise like a church bell, the walls and ceiling of the Object maintenance facility opened wide. Appearing from it was the giant weapon with a 50 meter main body and main cannons stretching in each direction, giving it a total length of over 140 meters. The Water Strider ruled over the winter Alaskan land with over 100 weapons and thick armor. As it had just replaced the parts for its undercarriage, the dark thundercloud-like noise created by the massive static electricity it created seemed to have a sharper tone to it.

It was about 300 meters away, but it had such great power that it could ignore such distances. The scene seriously made them feel like it would crush them under its legs if they gave the slightest movement.

Seeing that Object, Quenser whispered to Heivia.

“(…Get down when I charge out. Use that snowplow tractor over there for cover.)”

“(…Hey!!)”

Heivia did not have time to stop him.

Quenser charged out toward the enemy soldier approaching them. The surrounding soldiers held up their rifles, but they could not bring themselves to pull the trigger because of the struggle. That may have been thanks to the fact that they were all maintenance soldiers that had not been properly trained.

The enemy soldier must have thought Quenser was trying to grab

his rifle because he pulled the rifle away.

However, Quenser was not grabbing for the rifle.

He was grabbing the rectangular radio strapped on the soldier's shoulder like a knife.

"Get down!!" Quenser yelled just as the soldier pushed him away.

Quenser operated the radio with his thumb while rolling on the ground despite the fact that many rifle barrels were targeting him. Heivia assumed he was using the radio to detonate the C4 they had spread around the area, so he immediately jumped behind the snowplow tractor such that he covered up the Elite pilot.

However, that was not what happened.

Quenser was not detonating the C4 he had scattered as dummies.

He was detonating the leg of the Water Strider.

With an explosive noise, one of the four legs over 300 meters away exploded from the inside. It was not an external explosion. The explosion had clearly come from within the armor.

When Quenser had seen all the spare parts in the storehouse, he had determined it would be impossible to blow them all up. That was why he had searched out which spare parts would be put into the Object during its next maintenance and put C4 inside those parts. He still had plenty to learn, but his studies of the construction of Objects may have been what had allowed him to determine which parts were important and where he could stick the C4 inside them so it would not be noticed.

With its thick armor, the Object could not be destroyed even with a nuclear weapon. However, an explosive within the armor could destroy the equipment within the Object.

Also, he had blown away the turbines that consumed massive amounts of energy to create the static electricity that helped move the Object. Even one of them used twice the energy of a low-stability plasma cannon which meant each leg used 20 times that

energy during normal use. This made it quite a delicate point.

So what would happen if that point was destroyed?

Tons of sensors were installed in the turbines to predict failures and shut them down in stages to minimize the damage. How much of a burden would be put on the emergency transformers and discharge devices – as well as the reactor itself – if one was blown up causing a chain reaction that blew up the rest of them?

The soldier who Quenser had stolen the radio from and who was now pointing his rifle at the boy looked over toward the sudden explosion.

But…

"…Did you think you could destroy the Object by causing an explosion within it?" he said triumphantly.

The initial blast had caused a few secondary explosions, but it had remained isolated to a single leg. It had not been enough to destroy the entirety of the Water Strider.

"Did you know that 5% of our Object's weight is due to safety devices? A few rank and file soldiers sneaking into a maintenance facility and pulling a few tricks isn't going to cut it."

After causing the large explosion, Quenser had jumped behind the snowplow tractor and the enemy soldier was standing in the middle of the open snow aiming his rifle at him.

"The superiority of Objects will never be overturned. That is the battlefield we fight on."

“Is that so?”

However, Quenser continued to smile even in that hopeless situation.

“Did *you* know that our princess’s Object and your Water Strider have similar devices installed? I saw it mentioned in your maintenance manual. Some Objects have security devices installed to ensure they will not fall into enemy hands. If it has not been

destroyed but can no longer function, the enemy could retrieve it and analyze the technology. To prevent that, the special gas for the plasma cannons is used to blow the Object up."

Something appeared in Quenser's hand like he was a stage magician.

It was small enough to fit in his palm and looked like a rectangular circuit board.

"The device is controlled by precision sensors, so it almost never activates unnecessarily."

The enemy soldier immediately realized what the rectangular circuit board was.

However, it was too late to do anything about it.

"But if that sensor is removed from a turbine that blows up, do you think it can make an accurate decision?"

After all, the C4 explosion had caused a malfunction in the Water Strider's security device, causing it to activate. The special gas for the low-stability plasma cannons filled a special space within the giant machine…and caused a tremendous explosion shortly thereafter.

The great explosion caused by plasma within the Object enveloped the reactor in no time at all. However, it was an intentional explosion meant to destroy all classified information. It was set to only produce the destructive force needed to prevent any of the technology from being analyzed, so it was many times less powerful than a critical explosion of the reactor itself.

Nevertheless, all sound disappeared.

The giant sphere that was the Object's main body explosively expanded and a pure white flash of light and an intense shockwave were emitted in all directions. The enemy soldier standing out in the open were struck by the shockwave. He doubled over and was tossed a few dozen meters before landing. Similar things happened to the other enemy soldiers.

The giant Object had been blown up at the hands of a flesh-and-blood combat engineer.

That was an unheard-of event that completely overturned the theory of war itself. That accomplishment had been carried out by the combination of the skills of Quenser, Heivia, and the Elite girl. A combat engineer who normally worked behind the scenes to blow up stones or bridges to create or obstruct paths had been raised to the level of a hero that could influence the outcome of an entire war.

However, he did not have time to enjoy that fact.

“Gwaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!”

Quenser had immediately taken cover, but he did not escape unscathed.

Even though he was over 300 meters from the Object and hiding behind a snowplow tractor, the explosive flash of light seemed to pierce into his retinas. The surface of the steel tractor became scorched and it slid to the side.

Intense pain ran through his head and his sense of hearing was almost completely gone. A burning pain covered his entire back. He frantically rubbed his eyes as his vision was filled with pure white and tried to find Heivia and the Elite girl who must have been in a similar state collapsed nearby.

He then heard a clanking noise from somewhere.

A few of the soldiers must have miraculously managed to survive just like Quenser and the other two. His vision finally returned and he saw a few soldiers desperately trying to aim their rifles at him while staggering due to the shock of the blast.

Quenser once more felt the radio in his hand.

He set the frequency and sent the detonation code for the C4.

The explosives he had scattered about exploded and the enemy soldiers holding their rifles nearby were thrown humorously into

the air.

Quenser shouted at Heivia who was lying collapsed nearby.

“Can you run!? Grab one of the rifles from the ground and return fire!!”

“God damn you! That’s what you call ‘creating some confusion’? Something that big is going to make me panic, too!!” Heivia shouted as he picked up a rifle lying on the ground.

Even if they had managed to destroy the Water Strider due to countless coincidences, their goal was not the destruction of the maintenance base zone.

They just had to escape safely.

But…

“!?”

As Quenser and the others ran toward the exit of the base zone, a single enemy soldier blocked their way. He was already holding his rifle up and had it aimed squarely at Quenser’s chest. The two stared at each other in that hopeless situation. Quenser clearly saw a smile appear on the soldier’s face.

And then he heard a gunshot.

However, it had not come from the soldier’s rifle.

A sniper bullet flew from much farther away and pierced straight through the side of the enemy soldier’s head.

The rest of the enemy soldiers turned in shock in the direction the gunshot had come from just in time to see countless missiles and shells fly in from outside the base zone. The enemy soldiers were not the only ones surprised by this. Quenser and the other two had been saved by the unknown covering fire, but they just stood staring in disbelief.

“They actually came… That’s Froleytia’s unit, isn’t it!?”

“What the hell? It looks like that Japan obsessed pair of giant tits can actually be a decent commander!!”

The enemy base zone was filled with maintenance and radar facilities to support the Object. The rest of its forces were nothing but infantry units. They did not have any tanks or even armored vehicles.

On the other hand, Quenser and the others’ army had the full complement of tanks and fighters they had always complained were nothing but a waste of taxes. It had seemed almost certain that those outdated weapons would never actually be used, but they were finally able to show their true worth.

Several explosions were scattered about and enemy soldiers flew through the air. Amid it all, Quenser grabbed the Elite girl’s hand and ran for the exit. It seemed the sentry had been taken out by a howitzer.

Heivia ran alongside him while intermittently firing his rifle.

“Heh heh. Hey, Quenser! We’d have to be pretty stupid to die after coming this far, wouldn’t we!?”

“Yeah, Froleytia came all the way here because she believed in us. We need to at least live up to her expectations!!”

Had their superiors who had been fleeing come back because they had seen the clear sign of victory that was the Object exploding? Or had they felt some kind of responsibility after running off and abandoning the Elite girl?

As Quenser ran out through the base zone’s exit, he turned back to look at the base that had black smoke rising from it.

The battle was essentially over.

Both sides had lost their Object. All that was left was for the normal soldiers to fight it out. Once it came to that, there was a great difference between an army made up of maintenance soldiers and personnel for the radars meant for an Object battle and an army that had plenty of old-fashioned tanks and fighters.

(Flesh-and-blood soldiers blew up that Object…)

The boy who had carried out an act that had overturned the basic knowledge of war stared blankly at the enemy base zone where explosions and gunfire continued.

The Elite girl must have been thinking something similar because she opened her mouth to speak.

"…Those people may see us as monsters on the same level as an Object."

"Not my problem," Heivia said defensively as he stared at the base zone with his soot-covered face. "This is war. They're the ones that taught us that when they ignored our white flag. We had all forgotten the weight of the word 'war' due to the Object."

Part 17

War was taking place all over the world, but at the very least, the intense fighting that had been spreading through Alaska had come to a close. Both armies' Objects had been destroyed and (rare for that era) a fight between flesh-and-blood soldiers had broken out. In the end, Quenser and the others' unit had been victorious.

Quenser, Heivia, and the Elite girl had returned from Alaska to the home country.

They were from different places, so they parted ways upon leaving the maintenance base zone.

However, they had one last chance to meet.

A special awards ceremony was being held.

The one who had saved their army from a hopeless situation after their Object had been destroyed had not been a professional soldier. It had been a mere student who had been with the unit to study Objects. The news that flesh-and-blood people had destroyed an invincible Object had spread around the world and they were being honored with medals.

Quenser was within the waiting room of the party hall of a giant hotel the likes of which he had never set foot in before. (He had actually planned on visiting them quite often once he got rich as an Object designer.) The feeling of the unfamiliar dress clothes bothered him and he was continually adjusting the position of the high-quality necktie. However, the sight of Heivia after so long made him forget that feeling altogether.

"I thought you were supposed to be a noble? I've never seen someone who looked worse in dress clothes than me."

"Shut up. I lost the feel for this kind of thing while chasing deer in Alaska. And they don't look too bad on you."

However, he was from a noble family, so he was not overpowered by the atmosphere of the party hall even if the dress clothes did not seem to suit him. His body was not unnecessarily tensed up like Quenser's was.

"So what battlefield are you headed to next, Heivia?"

"Are you stupid? I was only killing time at a military base in order to have enough achievements to be my family's successor. Now that I'm publicly known as one of the people who blew up an Object, I have no need to stick with the military. Now I can live the rest of my life richly and comfortably. …Although that sounds like it has its own annoyances."

"I see. So you're heading straight for the 'successful career' path."

"You're doing pretty much the same thing, right? I heard the military took an interest in you and gave you the special right to look through the country's database. Now you can see as many Object blueprints as you want without having to head out to the battlefield. With so many samples to study, your learning speed should be overwhelmingly faster than those around you."

Hearing that, Quenser pinched his cheek.

It had yet to seem real to him, but it seemed he had succeeded in getting a head start on his own successful career.

"What's the princess doing?"

"Well, the Elite that pilots an Object obviously can't leave the front lines so easily. For us, destroying an Object was enough of a miracle to get public recognition, but for our Elite princess, it's the norm," said Heivia, casually showing just how different a world the Elite girl lived in.

Quenser thought once more on the burden those who piloted and fought with Objects had to bear.

Meanwhile, Heivia continued to speak.

"She's waiting for her next orders inside an improved Object

developed from the same line as her Object that was destroyed in Alaska. I hear a giant Object like that would take three or four years to develop from scratch, so it seems there had already been a plan underway to switch over to this new one. …Well, don't you think that princess must like the battlefield if she willingly chose a place like that to wait?"

"After everything we went through, I can't understand how she could possibly want to go back."

"Maybe it's *because* of everything we went through. She may have been given a chance to seriously think about the value of the lives of soldiers like us."

Suddenly, a knock came at the waiting room's door.

A beautiful secretary who worked for a high military official poked her head into the room and asked them to head to the party hall because the preparations for the ceremony were complete.

As they left the waiting room and headed down the passageway to the party hall, Quenser had a sudden thought.

"Oh, hey. Did you get an email from the princess?"

"You idiot. That's another special right you alone have. After all, you're the one that first grabbed a rifle and went running after her back then."

"…I was hoping to meet her while we were here."

"Well, we're parting ways once more after the awards ceremony, but let's make this more about celebrating our departure than mourning our parting."

They opened the double doors to the party hall and were greeted by applause and the flash of cameras. Guided by the voice of the master of ceremonies, Quenser and Heivia slowly headed up onto the stage where they were greeted by distinguished members of the military and had medals on ribbons that were probably more valuable than an Olympic gold medal placed around their necks.

At the end of the ceremony, the master of ceremonies gave one last remark.

“Now, a round of applause for these two who defeated an Object without the assistance of an Object of their own. Let us see them off to their next battlefield while praying that their special and excellent strategies can continue to benefit the world in the future.”

(…Eh? What did that idiot just say?)

While standing on the stage, Quenser frantically looked over at the various high military officials, but they were simply applauding with clearly false smiles on their faces.

Their eyes alone were serious.

Objects were synonymous with war. A silent pressure beat down on Quenser telling him that the officials were not about to let go of the kind of soldiers that could destroy an Object and turn around a war.

“(…Hey. Listen up, hero. It looks like this is no joke. I just heard that fat one over there talking. I know where we’re being assigned next!)”

“(…Where we’re being assigned? That’s already been decided!?)”

“(…Apparently, we’ll be working along with the princess’s Object! It seems they’re thinking that, since we managed to destroy an Object on our own, we might be able to damage an enemy army even more efficiently if we have an Object working with us!!)”

“(…Are you serious? So we’re going to be facing those monstrous Objects again!?)”

As the unexpected strength of his relationships with certain people made him dizzy, Quenser looked down at the medal hanging from his neck.

(Please tell me this isn’t going to end up being no different from a posthumous promotion.)

Chapter 2: Tom Thumb Runs through the Oil Field > > Battle to Prevent Passage through Gibraltar

Part 1

A girl known as an Elite, who was nicknamed 'the princess' (whether she liked it or not) by her own army and troops, was inside a giant naval port style of maintenance base zone.

The facility to maintain the Object she piloted had to be quite large to accommodate its over 50 meter size. If the ancient Greek designers who had built the Greek temples had seen the giant structure, they would likely have been utterly shocked. The princess's Object, Baby Magnum, fit snugly inside the structure.

The Object was surrounded by maintenance walkways and the princess was sitting in the center of the Object itself.

In the center of its sphere-shaped main body was the Object's cockpit.

To match the shape of the Object, the cockpit itself formed a sphere with a diameter of 2 meters. The seat was ergonomically streamlined, its shape had been calculated out by a computer to limit fatigue as much as possible, and it even had a massage functionality to avoid things such as bedsores.

The cockpit in the center of the Object had no windows or windshields with which to see outside with the naked eye. Her vision out was done solely through monitors working in unison with cameras and sensors. The monitors were curved to cleanly attach to the inside of the sphere and the Elite would constantly be viewing over 300 windows accurately but quickly.

It did not have just one means of control.

The princess used her index finger to lightly tap a device she was wearing that looked like sharp athletic sunglasses.

It was an example of an input device that used infrared rays to read the movements of her eyes, but she also had the more well-known fighter craft-type of control column and a large number of

keyboard-like buttons. Any one of the control systems could function as the main system and any one could function as the subsystem.

With multiple main systems and countless derivations given the possible combinations of subsystems, it seemed as if just learning how to use it would be enough to confuse you. However, an Object itself was the military might of an entire nation. Not being able to fight due to a deficiency in the system was not acceptable, so the Elite pilots had to at the very least go through a piloting manual that was thicker than an encyclopedia and many more manuals on top of that in order to ensure they could use any of the derived patterns with no problems and would know what to do in any given situation.

"…"

The Elite princess gave a small sigh within the Object that was resting as it was serviced.

The sigh was not due to having just seen what her next mission was and thinking about the families of the people she was about to kill. Instead, she was holding a completely ordinary cell phone in her hand. To prevent hacking, the Object normally cut off all signals from the outside except for a few communications devices independent from the rest of the system, but the barrier walls through the long tunnel-like passageway leading from the cockpit to the outside were all open for maintenance purposes.

She was looking at the cell phone's small screen.

A short email was displayed there.

It was from her true friend who she had met at a base in Alaska and who had come to save her when she had been in trouble.

"Heh heh."

The actual content of the email was quite short and blunt, but the princess did not care. She had never before imagined that who had sent it could mean so much more than what it actually said.

“Heh heh heh heh heh. Heh heh heh heh heh.“

She started humming and moving left and right in her seat in a little dance. And then she swung her hand around and accidentally hit a lever with the back of her hand.

One of the giant main cannons moved with a loud kachunk and was about to crush one of the walkways. The princess frantically pulled the lever back in place before the cannon could send the old maintenance lady flying for a homerun.

Part 2

“Quenser, the mission is about to start. Personal communications are restricted, so put your cell phone away until we enter free time again,” cautioned Froleytia, Quenser’s beautiful superior officer.

Quenser frantically stuck his phone in his pocket.

“The mission is simple,” boasted Froleytia within a large transport craft while shaking the long narrow kanzashi-style hairpin that held her silver hair. “The enemy’s Object is trying to break through the Strait of Gibraltar, the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. Due to the disaster that would occur if it made it through, we must stop the Object before it breaks through the strait but without blowing it up. That is all.”

“*That is all*!? Stop it without blowing it up? What, are we supposed to give a non-lethal blow to a monster like that?” complained Heivia.

Froleytia must have been aware she was asking the ridiculous because she gave a light shrug.

“The higher ups are seriously ordering that. It seems this Object is transporting a large amount of crude oil it stole and they want to retrieve it. Granted that is a rather reckless order,” Froleytia said simply. “But don’t worry. As the commander on the scene, I will be giving you more realistic orders. …The stolen oil doesn’t matter, so just stop the Object from breaking through the strait. If you need to blow it up, oil and all, that’s fine. That is all.”

“I’d say that’s a pretty reckless order in and of itself. That isn’t an opponent for flesh-and-blood soldiers…” grumbled Heivia, but it seemed Froleytia was not willing to compromise any more than that.

Quenser felt slightly dizzy when he imagined the intense fight to come.

"…The Mediterranean Sea. I guess that's why the color of the camouflage on the uniforms we were issued was changed to gray."

"Look, Heivia. Students these days catch on quickly. As an actual soldier, can you let him leave you behind like that? Hmm?"

"Fine, fine. I just have to switch out the camouflage pattern for my rifle, right? God, it's like switching out the cover of a cell phone."

"Are you picking a fight with your superior officer, Heivia? If so, hurry up and come at me."

"You probably don't want to do that. I think I'd get a little more excited than you'd like if you stepped on my crotch with those slender legs of yours."

With that response, Heivia started switching out the reinforced plastic parts. While glancing over at him, Quenser spoke to Froleytia.

"Why are you even here, Froleytia? Weren't you assigned to Alaska?"

"I wasn't transferred here because I wanted to be. It was those higher ups again. Since you two and the princess will be working on this mission together, they were probably thinking that it would be best to have the same person giving the commands as in Alaska. Really, I'd rather not have to stick around for your grandstanding."

"What will happen if this Object breaks through the strait? You said it was transporting crude oil it had stolen, right?" asked Quenser in an attempt to change the subject.

Froleytia shrugged.

"Our country has been cutting off provisions to the enemy base zone for six months now and that would make that half year a complete waste. Apparently, the enemy Object travelling across the sea can also mine for its own oil. Paying no heed to the divisions between international waters and other countries' territorial waters, it has been drilling up the oil, storing it in itself, and going around distributing it to its allied countries."

“So it’s something like a delivery service for state-sponsored terrorist groups and it would benefit the world if we sunk it here,” said Heivia as his lips curved slightly.

Quenser shook his head.

“Is oil even needed on a battlefield centered on Objects? Their reactors are JPlevelMHD types, right? I thought those functioned on some special mechanism.”

“That’s the ironic thing. The more advanced technology gets, the more efficient it is to use older things like coal.”

“Yes, but for the JPlevel, it is melted down to have its structure altered before it is re-solidified. Do you know how long it takes to burn through it? Once you put that fuel inside, you don’t have to swap it out for 5 years.”

As they were diverging onto a tangent, Froleytia brought the conversation back on track.

“The oil is used by the maintenance base zone, not the Object itself. Just like with the base you attacked in Alaska, an Object cannot continue to function if it does not undergo maintenance.” As she would be unable to drink once they reached the base, she sipped at a strong shochu. “The goal tape is currently being put up between the two sides of the Strait of Gibraltar. It’s a net with mines intertwined at even intervals. It’s supposed to prevent the giant steel form from entering, but who knows how effective it will be against that Object. That’s why the princess’s Object will engage it in battle and you two will act behind the scenes.”

“Sounds like a harsh area. I’ll probably be killed by stray bullets 100 times over,” muttered Heivia.

Quenser looked out the small window on the side of the transport craft. He could see the beautiful blue sea spreading out below the clouds. As he looked down at it, he muttered a few words.

“I’m back, you god damn battlefield.”

Part 3

The large transport craft Quenser and the others were aboard landed on a runway on the beach, but apparently that was not where the maintenance base zone they were assigned to was located.

“…You’ve gotta be kidding me. That’s right in the middle!” moaned Heivia from atop a crude military boat with standard metal plates covering it and two autocannons on the front and back.

Quenser understood how Heivia felt.

A structure similar to an offshore oil platform stood at almost the very center of the Strait of Gibraltar. It was an island of steel supported by numerous pillars. Apparently, it was a quickly constructed base zone to be used to intercept the enemy Object that was attempting to break through the strait.

The pillars reached over 50 meters above the surface of the water and they supported a ceiling-like sheet about 300 meters square. Below that, many walkways, stairways, and elevators stretched about in every direction.

Quenser looked over at Froleytia.

“We’re just a giant target like this. If we know that huge thing is coming, why don’t we call in the air force rather than just wait for it to come?”

“That won’t work against an Object. Your studies of their designs should have told you that much. Objects are synonymous with war. To stop the monster headed for the Strait of Gibraltar, we had to build a base zone for the princess’s Object.”

Quenser was well aware of that, but he simply did not want to fight.

At any rate, having to work in such a dangerous place was not

something a person could easily bear. If the Object bombarded the base zone, their corpses would never rise back to the surface.

Quenser looked around and could see several more similar oil platform-like structures dotting the sea.

“Those are not oil platforms. This area is not a good place to drill,” replied Froleytia when he mentioned that initial impression. “The oil needed for maintenance is gathered from cooperative areas around the world and stored in tanks at the bottom of the sea.”

“…So we’re doing the same thing as them. That really drains my motivation to fight,” Quenser said.

Meanwhile, Heivia disembarked and climbed up the metal stairway on his way to the top of the base zone. Of course, he was not intending to climb 50 meters using the stairway. He was first heading for an open area with a work elevator.

Quenser followed him.

“Hey, why are you so motivated?”

“It seems the higher ups are expecting quite a bit from us. From what I heard, they’ve supplied us with powered suits from the army.”

“Those things will be blown away to the point that not even ash remains from one hit from an Object.”

“But the powered suit might keep us from being blown to pieces by an explosion, right? Being killed by your ally’s armor would be one of the lamest ways to go.”

They came to a large metal plate 10 meters above the surface of the water. The area was over 100 meters wide and stretched about 30 meters back. Since there were a number of cranes stretching down toward the water like fishing poles, it must have been an area for loading and unloading cargo from transport ships. On the wall opposite the cranes, a number of elevators for moving entire containers up and down were prepared. The unrefined elevators were about the size of a family-oriented 3LDK but had only the bare

minimum of railings.

Heivia ran around the large space before stopping in the center and spreading his arms wide. He may have been attempting to call down a UFO.

“Arriving at a large base really raises your spirits, doesn’t it?”

“…Filling my mind with knowledge that can’t be used for a thesis is a waste of space.”

“Are you still acting like a battlefield student? You graduated from that path in Alaska, remember? Once you’ve passed, there’s nothing wrong with slacking off for the rest of the time, right?”

“Your brain is like a muscle, so you’ll need to rehabilitate it if you stop using it. I don’t want to all of a sudden realize I know nothing but how to blow things up.”

As they spoke back and forth, Froleytia waved a hand over at them.

“Hey, we aren’t here to have fun. Go put your things in your lockers and get to your stations. I heard that the higher ups will be observing this, so any mistakes will give them a bad impression of you.”

“That’s right. And our issued explosive was changed from C4 to Hand Axe, wasn’t it? That stuff is more valuable per gram than platinum.”

“Even so, it won’t even scratch on Object’s armor,” said Quenser having recalled what their mission was.

He then whispered to his companion next to him.

“(…Hey, do you honestly think this will work out somehow? It isn’t normal for people like us to take on an Object. Miraculous coincidences aren’t going to just keep happening…)”

“Actually, I do think this will work out.”

Quenser’s eyes opened wide at Heivia’s surprisingly lighthearted

response.

Heivia shrugged.

“After all, it’s not just us this time. We have the princess’s Object. The Object vs. Object battle will be the main focus and we just have to help out every now and then from behind the scenes in order to give the princess as much of an advantage as we can. The princess will take care of everything else. This isn’t the same as in Alaska when we had to take on that ridiculously huge Object without an Object of our own.”

“Are you…sure?”

“Yeah, look.”

Heivia pointed past the giant metal sheet of the base zone and out to sea.

Facilities similar to the base were located here and there throughout the sea. It was not just a few. Twenty or thirty base zones covered the area of the strait in a straight line at even intervals. It looked something like an area filled with offshore oil platforms.

“They may have been hastily constructed, but there are about 30 Object maintenance facilities here. Even if one or two of them are targeted, we’re still prepared to keep the princess’s Object running. It isn’t normal to spend that much money on this and they won’t let facilities they put that much money into be easily destroyed. The higher ups must have a plan to keep that from happening. And that also raises our odds of survival.”

That did indeed allow Quenser to view the situation more positively.

If they were truly nothing more than sacrificial pawns, the higher ups in the military would not have spent that much of their budget. And they also had the princess’s Object. Given what had happened in Alaska, they could not solely rely on her, but having her still

made a large difference. At the very least, a battle between Objects was more balanced than the overwhelmingly one-sided alternative.

Quenser and Heivia's job was to support her.

They did not have to face a giant Object head on.

They just had to help the princess from the background and prepare the conditions needed for her victory.

If that was all, it was indeed possible that they could manage.

A smile naturally appeared on Quenser's face and he turned to his companion.

"In that case, we should be fi-…"

Before he could finish speaking, a neighboring base zone was blown to pieces.

The explosive noise arrived slightly after the visual information.

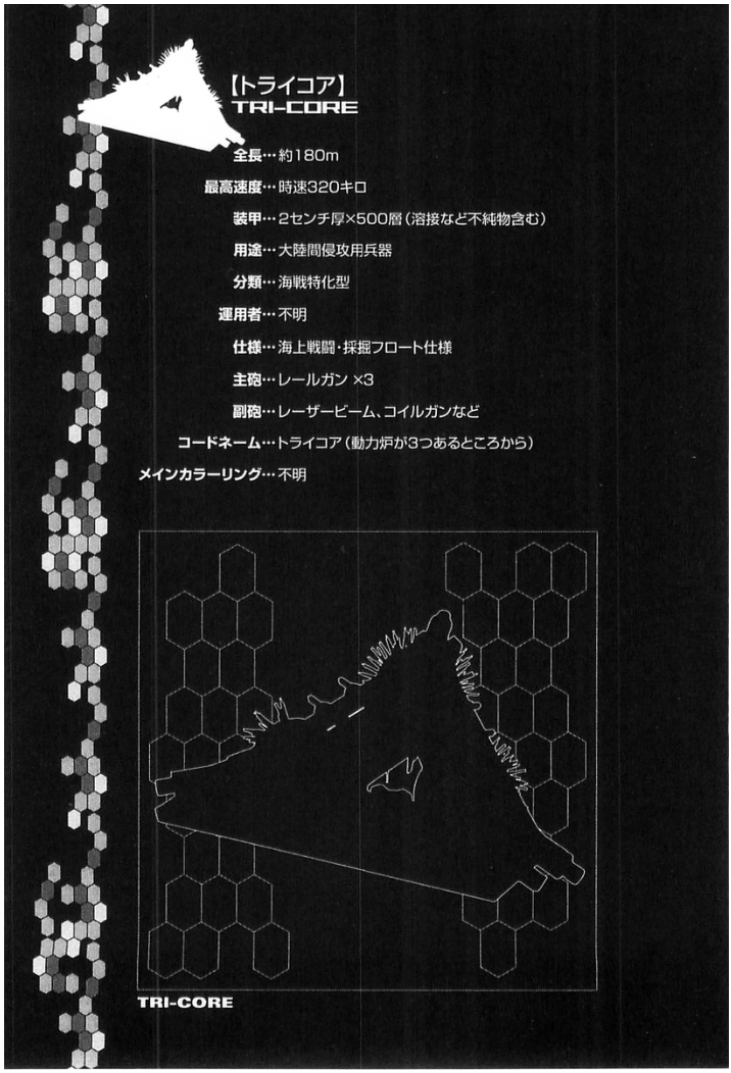
As if it were a card pyramid being struck by a slap, the base zone collapsed due to a horizontal strike and sank into the sea. That neighboring base was over 200 meters away, but the shockwave from the explosion blew Quenser and Heivia off their feet. Small wire-like fragments of parts rained down from above them.

"What…the hell!? Was it not built up to code!?" Heivia shouted as he grimaced due to a ringing pain in his ears.

"You idiot! Don't try to escape from the reality in front of you! That had to be an Object!!"

Quenser had landed on his back, so he rolled over onto his stomach and used his binoculars to look across the horizon.

He spotted a mountain-like form.



He saw the giant sphere of nuclear shelter-like armor surrounding a reactor that was characteristic of Objects as well as countless weapons extending from it. The main weapons on this Object were railguns. Apparently, they could fire shells a few meters long at almost Mach 10. Their destructive power had already been demonstrated. One of them had wiped an entire base zone from the map in a single shot.

On top of all that, this Object did not have just one giant sphere

with a reactor inside.

It had three.

Each sphere was arranged such that they constructed an equilateral triangle and straight line-shaped armored parts connected the spheres. Ripples spread out from the Object as special A-shaped floats and air cushion engines on the bottom of the Object allowed it to float on the water.

The Object was specialized for naval battles. It was known as Tri-Core.

As soon as Heivia saw that giant form that had been in the military documents, he started yelling out complaints.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait!! How is that thing even moving around!?”

“I don’t know! It’s probably some kind of combination of using air to make it float like a hovercraft and a water jet or something! For something that huge, it wouldn’t surprise me if it had multiple means of propulsion!!”

Paying no heed to those two boys, the Object aimed its giant railgun that looked like a steel pylon on its side at them.

It gave no warning or threat.

With a tremendous explosive noise, the base zones spread out in a line across the sea were horizontally blown away one by one.

Heivia covered his ears and shouted over the shockwaves.

“Shit, are we the prizes at a carnival shooting game or something!? What happened to the net of mines that was set up!?”

“Normal explosives aren’t going to do a thing! Surely you had realized that much!”

Quenser turned his binoculars in a different direction.

Only 60 seconds had passed since the first shot and almost half the

base zones had already been sunk. That meant it was sinking them at a rate of about one every four seconds.

(Where is the princess's Object? Don't tell me it was taken out with one of those bases!)

Quenser was starting to panic.

"Hey, what're we going to do!? We were too naïve! An Object isn't something we'll be fine taking on even if it isn't head on! Hanging around on the edge of a battle between Objects is enough to get you blown away!!"

"No, wait. Why hasn't the princess's Object counterattacked yet!?"

Still lying down, Quenser looked around with his binoculars, but he saw no sign of the other giant Object.

That was when Froleytia called out to them while glaring at the Object on the ocean with an irritated expression.

"What!? Didn't you two hear!?"

"I don't like the sound of that…"

"The princess is in a naval port-style base zone on the land having maintenance done on the floats for a naval battle! Apparently, they started acting up while crossing the Atlantic, so her arrival was delayed! Why did you think we chartered that transport plane to fly you over here so quickly!? Since our Cinderella is a little too lax with time, it's going to be a bit before she gets here. Since you two are our only means of opposing an Object without one of our own, the higher ups want you to damage it now so the princess can easily finish it off once she arrives!!"

"No, fuck that," said Heivia, briefly transcending the normal hierarchy of the military. "There's no way we can do anything on our own. There's nothing we can do without an Object!! Quit joking around and raise the white flag!! Didn't you say back in Alaska that wars these days are not all-out wars!?"

"That is my decision when we can surrender the land and evacuate.

This time, our lines are constructed such that they block the enemy's path. Even if we raise the white flag, the enemy will still break through our lines to continue their mission. Whether we surrender or not, the Object still needs to destroy our base zones to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar. …Simply put, the situation will not allow us to surrender." Without admonishing them, Froleytia continued speaking with a humble expression. "Also, the higher ups did not give me the wireless code for the white flag this time. It seems they want us to prevent the enemy Object from getting through even if we get blown to pieces in the process."

"…!?"

"So try to stop it as if your life depends on it…because it does. That's why you were issued that Hand Axe despite it being more expensive than platinum."

"Like hell we can do thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaattttttttttttttttttttt!!"

"Like hell we can do thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaattttttttttttttttttttt!!"

Quenser and Heivia both shouted at the top of their lungs and ran off ignoring their orders. They headed for the ocean surface spreading out beyond the cranes extending down like fishing poles. They were about 10 meters up, but jumping off was still safer than being targeted by the enemy Tri-Core.

"Hey, wait a-…!!"

Froleytia started to call out after them, but before she could finish, she realized the Tri-Core was aiming one of its railguns their way. Her expression utterly changed and she jumped off of the base zone after Quenser and Heivia. Immediately afterwards, the giant mountain-like base zone was blown to pieces by the giant mountain-like Object.

Part 4

Quenser and Heivia were thrown out to sea.

Remnants of the base both large and small were scattered about, dirtying the sea. The scene was similar to the fallen trees and other flotsam piling up in a river mouth after a typhoon passes by. However, the maintenance base zone had been made up of steel and concrete, so the remnants scattered about the surface of the water were sinking down into the depths.

Quenser and Heivia were treading water in a desperate attempt to keep their heads above water, but their military uniforms were quite heavy after absorbing so much water. They were also carrying kilograms of plastic explosives and rifles, so it was not the same as swimming while wearing a swimsuit. It felt as if an invisible hand was grabbing at their ankles.

“Uehh…Dammit…I’m gonna die!! We got carried away! I’m never coming back to a battlefield with an Object on it!!” shouted Quenser even as he was about to sink.

Next to him, Heivia’s movements looked something like the halfway point between swimming and drowning.

“At this rate, we’ll be crushed by the remnants of the base raining down even if the Object doesn’t shoot us! Where are the powered suits we were issued!?”

“At the bottom of the sea by now! How about you dive down 300 meters and get them for us!?”

“They issued us suits that would make us sink like a stone for a battle on the sea!? Were the higher ups trying to get rid of us after they had gotten what they wanted from us!?”

“More importantly, shouldn’t we try to get as far away from the base as possible!? The oil tanks are at the bottom of the sea with pipes bringing up what’s necessary for maintenance, right? The

safety devices must have kicked in to keep that crude oil from coming out of the broken pipes, but who knows how long those safety devices can last against that Tri-Core's attack!!"

"So there's going to be a black fountain followed by a literal sea of flames!? Who the hell okayed this horrible mission!?"

As Heivia complained, he sank below the surface once and then frantically worked his way back up. Once his head was back above the surface again, he shook it like a wet dog.

"Shit, I can't last much longer. I-I'm sinking… I can get rid of these explosives, right?"

"And turn your 1% chance of survival into 0%!?"

"What good is this junk going to be!? Even if we set it up properly, it won't damage the armor! And we can't even get close in this situation!!"

"That's true…Getting close to it is going to be a real issue, but… gyahh!! It's coming this way!!"

Quenser screamed and Heivia looked toward the horizon with a shocked look.

The Tri-Core may have decided its victory was assured now that it had destroyed almost all of the base zones with its giant railguns (or it was relieved that no Object had appeared) because it was approaching while intermittently firing.

Its speed was around 200 kph.

(Is it just going to break right through the strait?)

Just as Quenser thought that, he heard Froleytia shout over at him with only her head above the water.

"Do something!! If it breaks through, it will get that oil to the enemy base zone! If you don't want that, stop it!!"

"Who cares about that now!? It can bring them some nice cooking

oil along with it for all I care!!"

"If that oil gets there, the base zone's Object maintenance area will be up and running again!! If that happens, an even worse Object that had been stopped due to lack of maintenance will join in!! The Mediterranean will be thrown into an even worse hell!"

"Oh, give me a fucking break!! Do you think I could get discharged from the military if I shot this superior officer of ours in the head!?"

Heivia made his comment to Quenser with a completely serious look in his eyes, but Quenser had more important things to worry about.

"Hey, this is bad! The Tri-Core is headed this way!!" he shouted with an even more serious look on his face.

"Of course it is, hero!! It's trying to break through the strait, rememb-…"

"No!! It's on a route that will directly crush us!!"

"Oh, come on!! You have got to be kidding me!!" Heivia shouted, but unfortunately, Quenser was not kidding.

The Tri-Core with its three reactors had realized that there was still a base zone that retained its basic shape even after 2 or 3 shots from its giant railgun and now seemed to be heading over to fire at pointblank range. Its giant form approached, paying no heed to Quenser and the others treading water there.

Of course, a human body would be utterly crushed if it was directly hit by the giant form.

The Tri-Core seemed to float using the same means as a hovercraft that blew air down, but it took so much to keep that giant body afloat that it was only floating 30-50 cm from the surface. Quenser and the others would surely be hit as they treaded water in its path and the blast of wind that kept the hundreds of thousands of tons afloat would utterly crush a human body.

At that rate, they would be pureed and eaten by octopuses.

Heivia's eyes widened as he saw the Tri-Core approaching on a clockwise path.

"We need to get out of the way!!"

"You idiot! There's no way we can swim that fast!! The Tri-Core is over 150 meters wide! Not even an Olympic gold medalist could avoid it!!"

"Then tell me, future scholar!! How are we supposed to survive this!?"

Even as they yelled at each other, the Tri-Core continued to approach with overwhelming speed.

It would reach them in less than 30 seconds.

(If we can't escape by swimming to the left or right, the only option is…!!)

Quenser swam toward a nearby sinking lifeboat.

Seeing that, Heivia shouted, "Do you really think some cheap motorboat can outrun an Object made for naval battles!?"

"No, you idiot! Put this on!!"

Quenser tossed something that had been provided on the lifeboat toward Heivia and Froleytia. It was a hairspray-sized can with a clear mask to cover the nose and mouth on the end.

"An oxygen tank…?"

"Put it on and dive!!" said Quenser as he put on his own clear mask and pointed down. "The Tri-Core travels over the water with giant floats and an air cushion engine! In that case, it shouldn't reach down below the surface!!"

"!?"

It seemed Heivia and Froleytia tried to give some kind of reaction, but Quenser did not have time to listen.

The end of the Tri-Core as it travelled at almost 200 kph had drawn quite near to them. As it travelled at such high speeds, it created a V-shape of high waves. Even though the actual craft was floating, the intense downward wind was tearing into the surface of the water. Even if by some miracle they managed to escape to the side of the Tri-Core, those waves would be enough to swallow them up.

“Shit!!”

Quenser dove down below the surface without having time to check if his mask was working properly.

The Tri-Core’s thick floats passed by above, barely missing him. The intense wind greatly disturbed the surface of the water, but that great fury did not reach Quenser below the surface.

(Hoo. I somehow made i-…)

Just as Quenser was breathing a sigh of relief, something almost caused his breathing to stop.

The Tri-Core’s main body did indeed use giant floats and an air cushion engine to almost perfectly float above the surface of the water.

However, something like a steel pylon stuck straight down from each of the three sphere reactors. They were shark anchors that were retractable like a police baton. The weights ensured that the giant Object would not roll onto its side.

The main body of the Object passed by over Quenser’s head, but the pylon-sized shark anchor was headed straight for him.

“!?”

Quenser immediately swam to the side in an attempt to avoid it, but the Tri-Core made a move of its own at the exact same time. It may have been adjusting its aim, but it made a sudden clockwise rotation like someone sliding their feet around on the ground. Its speed dropped considerably, but the giant shark anchor almost seemed to correct its trajectory toward Quenser like it was a guided weapon.

(Ooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?)

At that point, he could not come up with any plans or tricks. Quenser simply frantically moved his arms and legs to try to get as far away from it as he could. However, his tiny human body only spun around in the water like a leaf blowing in the wind.

“Cough!?”

The shark anchor itself did not hit him.

If it had, his body would no longer have been recognizable as human.

He just barely managed to avoid it, but the swirling seawater agitated by the shark anchor’s giant mass put Quenser’s body into a spin.

(But at least I managed to avoid-…)

Quenser had miraculously managed to keep his life, but he was still not allowed a sigh of relief.

Something suddenly grabbed at his leg.

“!?”

Such intense pain ran through his leg that he thought his ankle had been dislocated, but it was not actually that serious. Even so, Quenser’s consciousness started to dim. Whatever had gotten caught around his ankle started to drag him through the sea at around 50 kph.

(Cough cough!! Dammit. Am I caught on some part of the Tri-Core!?)

Quenser looked at his ankle that had a grinding pain running through it and his expression turned bitter.

Something like a metal net was wrapped around one of the shark anchors and a portion of it had gotten wrapped around Quenser’s ankle. It did not look like a net that would be used for fish. This

became even more clear when Quenser looked around and noticed a metal sphere nearby. It was about the size of the large balls used in sports festivals and its metal surface had thick thorn-like things covering it.

Quenser's expression stiffened even further upon seeing it.

(…A mine!?)

He recalled that Froleytia had said a net covered in mines had been placed across the Strait of Gibraltar to obstruct the Tri-Core. The Object had used its giant form to force through the net and had been dragging it along ever since.

Something like that mine could not destroy that Object.

But if it were to detonate there, it *would* blow Quenser to pieces.

(Dammit. I'm not going to let myself be killed by my own side's trap!!)

Perhaps in order to even more accurately aim its railgun, the Tri-Core stopped moving, its air cushion engine weakened, and it came to a stop on the surface of the water using only its floats.

Quenser used that chance to ball himself up and reach for his ankle. However, it was so tangled up in the net that he could not free it. He panicked, but then someone else's hand reached in from the side.

(!? …Heivia!!)

Apparently, his companion had gotten caught in the net, too. Heivia seemed to try to say something, but the oxygen mask and seawater prevented his voice from reaching Quenser.

Heivia used his hands surprisingly skillfully and freed Quenser's ankle from the net, but he grabbed Quenser's arm when Quenser tried to leave on the current of the water.

The Tri-Core was at an almost complete stop and was firing its railgun. It was utterly destroying a base zone that had already lost

almost all of its original form and that's soldiers had already leapt into the sea.

While its attention was elsewhere, they could safely escape from the Tri-Core by letting go of the net. However, Heivia kept a grip on the net.

(?)

Quenser was confused, but he grabbed the net like a ladder all the same. He simply could not tell what Heivia was thinking. The other boy seemed to be trying to explain, but Quenser could not hear him in the water.

After a bit, Heivia realized his efforts were a waste and simply pointed up with one hand while holding onto the net with the other.

What his gesture indicated was simple.

The blast of air from the air cushion engine seems to have stopped, so let's take this chance to climb aboard the Tri-Core before it accelerates again.

Part 5

Quenser and Heivia climbed up the net like it was playground equipment and finally reached the surface.

The giant floats of the Tri-Core made an A-like shape. They were in the hollow center area where the surface of the water looked like an open fish pond.

Heivia removed his oxygen mask and started spewing out the curses that he had not been able to get across within the water.

“Fuck! I’m all sticky and shit! I’m like a wet dog!! What the hell was that about being safe if we dove!? I almost died!!”

“You only asked how to survive, not how to be safe! Anyway, where’s Froleytia!?”

“How the hell should I know? She’s probably floating around here somewhere,” Heivia said carelessly as he looked around. “Getting up above the surface is great and all, but how are we supposed to get up on the Tri-Core’s deck?”

“There’s a maintenance ladder over there.”

“!? Oh, shit! Hurry, up, Quenser!! The Tri-Core’s finished with its target practice and is starting to move again! We’re gonna be crushed by the blast from the air cushion!! The wind that lifts up this six hundred thousand ton monster is about to blow down!!”

“Shit! It isn’t going to head straight for some enemy country, is it!?”

“How the hell should I know!? Just climb up! That shark anchor is still a danger. Its retractable end functions both as a suction tube to bring in water for the water jet and as drainage. If that giant pillar retracts up near the surface, we’ll be sucked in!!”

And so Quenser and Heivia climbed up the ladder installed on the side of the giant float that was over 5 meters thick and arrived on the deck of the Tri-Core.

The float that kept the Object afloat was over 20 meters wide and giant cylindrical tanks that looked like something from an industrial complex were installed right next to them.

"…The Tri-Core can drill for oil, right?"

"I'll set up the Hand Axe, but do you really think it's enough to sink the Tri-Core?" said Quenser with a dubious look even as he stabbed the fuse into the explosive. "In Alaska, we managed to blow up the Object from the inside by setting the explosives up within the parts in the enemy base zone, but we don't even know when the Tri-Core needs maintenance next."

"Hey, look at that," said Heivia as he removed his rifle from its shoulder strap.

Modern rifles were not made unusable just by being plunged into seawater.

"?"

Quenser looked in the direction Heivia indicated with his chin and he saw one of the other floats. As previously explained, the Tri-Core's floats were A-shaped and many different facilities were constructed elsewhere. One block had giant cranes used for drilling for oil and one block was lined with giant storage buildings similar to what was normally found at a port.

Quenser glanced over the fish pond-like areas of open sea created by the shape of the floats.

"…Large storage areas? I see. The Tri-Core has its maintenance base built into itself!! That way it doesn't have to protect a weak maintenance fleet-style base zone. With three reactors, it can pull something like that off!"

"No, not that!"

"Hah?"

"Enemy soldiers! Those facilities come with a full complement of soldiers armed with machine guns!!"

As Heivia spoke, he grabbed Quenser's arm and pulled him behind cover.

They heard gunfire and then sparks started flying from the float at their feet and the metal panels they were hiding behind.

"Wait a second. Aren't we hiding behind an oil tank?!"

"There's nowhere else to hide!! Would you rather go stand out on the wide open float!?"

The few dozen Tri-Core soldiers seemed to have noticed where Quenser and Heivia were hiding because their gunfire grew very careful and sporadic. They did not use any kind of grenade.

Heivia held his rifle out from behind the oil tank and returned fired in short, two or three shot bursts.

"Hey, circle around the float and head to the maintenance area!!"

"And pull off the same thing as in Alaska? But when is the Tri-Core going to undergo maintenance!? If it isn't for three days, we'll be stuck running away for three days straight!!"

"Then find some weakness!! We have to find some way of taking advantage of this opportunity and damaging this thing somehow!!" said Heivia as he continued to pull the trigger, but the gunfire suddenly stopped.

"What, is it jammed!?"

"Shut up, I'm gonna fix it!!"

Heivia moved back fully behind cover and removed the cover to his rifle. He just had to take out the jammed bullet and replace the cover to put the gun in working order again, but…

Suddenly, the ground started shaking.

The Tri-Core seemed to be rotating clockwise and the two of them were almost thrown off as they fell down. As Heivia had been in the middle of taking apart his rifle, the small metal parts and springs

scattered atop the float.

A truly displeased look appeared on Heivia's face.

"…Can I cry?"

"Don't get discouraged. Just gather them up!! Look, they've realized something's gone wrong for us and are picking up their rate of fire!!"

However, a few of the parts had fallen off the float and into the ocean, so nothing could be done to fix the rifle. Heivia tossed the incomplete rifle to the side and pulled out his spare handgun to fire back.

"Hey, have you figured out where you're gonna set up the explosives!?"

"Give me a second. I'm using my mobile device to access the military database."

"And I thought the waterproofing option was only good for letting you surf the web in the bath."

"You'd stay in too long and the heat of the bath would get to you if you actually did that. You were an analyst, right, Heivia? So you helped draw up predicted general designs of enemy Objects from distant observations? Then you might be able to find a weakness if you look over this." Quenser looked down at the small screen. "Oh, c'mon! What a piece of junk. This signal is terrible. Maybe it'll be better over here…"

"Wait, you idiot!! That's right in the middle of enemy fire!!"

When Heivia frantically pulled him back, Quenser returned to his senses.

"Oh, I guess we don't really have time to leisurely look over this diagram."

"What, do you want them to prepare us a stylish café with free wifi in the middle of the battlefield?"

“Actually, the Tri-Core might really have a café somewhere,” replied Quenser with a serious expression as he lightly kicked at the ground. “But when you think about it, couldn’t this be the biggest weakness?”

“The giant floats, hm? Well, this giant Object does have three spherical main bodies, so it’d probably just sink down to the bottom of the ocean under its own weight if the floats were to burst.”

“The problem is figuring out how to destroy these floats using only the Hand Axe we have when direct hits from giant mines didn’t even scratch them. If we could focus some kind of impact to destroy one point…”

“Oh, fuck!!” Heivia shouted suddenly, cutting off Quenser’s thoughts.

Quenser looked over to see Heivia’s handgun’s motion stopping in the middle of its blowback.

“I’m out of ammo! This handgun was my only spare weapon, so I didn’t bring many magazines for it!! If we stay here any longer, we’re gonna get our brains blown out by normal soldiers!!”

“Then what are we supposed to do about the Tri-Core!?”

“How the hell should I know!? Just throw the explosives around randomly and then jump into the sea! Our only choice is to try to meet up with Froleytia wherever she is and get out of here. This may be our only chance to get away!!”

In the meantime, the gunfire from the enemy soldiers became even more sporadic. They seemed to be trying to circle around the large A-shaped float between short intervals of firing.

Quenser and Heivia were running out of time.

They would be cornered before long.

Quenser hated the thought of giving up on the Tri-Core, but it was true that he could see no weakness they could use to surely sink it with the Hand Axe. Drawing out the firefight would only be

detrimental to him and Heivia.

(I guess that settles it…!!)

Quenser and Heivia gritted their teeth and started to jump off the A-shaped float and into the sea.

However, they ended up not leaving the battle.

This was not due to a noble reason like their heroic hearts refusing to flee.

The Tri-Core had been struck by a large caliber bombardment fired from a distance and the nearby shockwave had knocked Quenser and Heivia back.

That one strike had been enough to nearly eliminate their sense of hearing.

The damage must have reached the organ that controlled his sense of balance because Quenser was unable to get back up. He could only desperately try to suppress an intense headache and an urge to vomit.

“Damn…it…! What…was that?!”

Heivia was right next to him, but his voice sounded indistinct.

While collapsed atop the giant float, Quenser used only his eyes to search for the attacker.

He noticed something quite large approaching at high speed from the horizon.

Its main body was a giant sphere. Below that was a normally upside down Y-shaped static electricity propulsion device, but it currently had a marine battle-use circular float added on. Seven giant arms stretched from the back of the sphere and each arm had a giant main cannon attached to the end. It had likely been one or more of those that had fired.

Its method of propulsion must have been different than when it was

on land because the dark thundercloud-like noise created by the massive amount of static electricity could not be heard.

(…The Object…?)

“Hey, this is bad,” said Heivia in a trembling voice to Quenser whose mind was still hazy. “This is very, very bad!! That’s the princess’s Object! If we stay here, we’ll get wrapped up in a bombardment between Objects!!”

“!?”

Quenser’s face suddenly twitched.

The 50 meter monstrous weapons that were Objects used weapons such as laser beams, railguns, coilguns, and low-stability plasma cannons. Their destructive power made a battleship look like nothing. If they got caught up in a battle between Objects, it did not matter if one was their ally. A piece of an Object’s outer armor blown off by an explosion would be more than enough to kill a flesh-and-blood soldier instantly.

They now truly had no choice but to leave the Tri-Core as quickly as possible.

However, their bodies would not move as they wanted them to due to the shockwave that had struck them.

The same thing had happened to the enemy soldiers who had been aiming at them from a different float. They were frantically trying to escape to the maintenance base zone atop the Tri-Core’s float.

Meanwhile, the two Objects were staring each other down and their steel pylon-sized main cannons were being moved into position.

The normal soldiers no longer had time to flee.

The battle had begun.

Tremendous explosions and shockwaves rang out.

Quenser and Heivia were not even able to crawl forward. All they

could do was lie face down with their hands over their heads.

The Tri-Core fired its powerful railguns one after another, drawing on the full power of its three reactors.

The princess's Object accelerated back and forth in short bursts to escape the enemy's sights and repeatedly fired its seven main cannons in their coilgun mode that used magnetism.

A flesh-and-blood human had no way to oppose those giant weapons known as Objects. The surface of its armor came detached and scattered about like a firework. The scale of the destruction was so great that anyone watching was completely overwhelmed and Quenser and Heivia were stuck right in the middle of it all. It was more than they could bear.

"Fuck!! Objects really are synonymous with war! Our lives don't matter at all in the middle of all this!!"

"No, I'm betting the princess just doesn't know we're on here," said Quenser as he used his handheld device to try to contact the princess's Object.

As usual, the signal was terrible.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"I'm gonna have her switch over to mainly using her lasers. If she melts through the armor rather than blowing it away, we're a lot less likely to die from a stray shot! It gives her no real advantage strategically, but she might just be willing to hear us out!"

"Hey, we're not gonna be blinded by the bright welding light are we!?"

"Oh, would you rather die in a downpour of shrapnel!? At any rate, we just need to jump into the sea while the princess draws the Object's attention with the lasers. Once we're out of the way, she can switch right back to using the coilguns!!" Quenser then spoke to the Elite princess through his handheld device. "This is Quenser. We are currently on the Tri-Core's deck! Please switch your weapon for a short time while we escape. Please switch over to the WL3B1s! I

repeat, switch over to the WL3B1s!!”

Part 6

The Elite girl held the control column within the cockpit of the Baby Magnum, one of the Objects that was synonymous with war.

Special talent was required to pilot one of those giant weapons.

However, this talent was not some strange psychic power. What was needed was an exceedingly high proficiency in skills anyone could develop such as memory, calculation ability, multitasking, and situational awareness.

An Object was a giant weapon that controlled over 100 weapons at once.

As such, just managing the targeting data required being able to process hundreds of pieces of data at once. The weapons also had secondary target functionality (multiple targets could be locked onto and the sights could be switched between them at any time), so using an Object's abilities to their fullest required following 300 or 400 enemies at once.

And that was only for controlling the weaponry.

To fully understand every function of the 50 meter Object was more than even a natural genius could handle. Only an Elite who had his or her data processing ability raised to the limit was able to pilot an Object.

To alleviate this problem, some armies had tried dividing the control among a large crew and some companies had used an AI to simplify the work required.

However, using a large crew created a time lag for communication between parts of the Object which led to defeat from an Object that was piloted by a single Elite who could make decisions instantly. When an AI was used, the AI would be unable to respond to any situation unfamiliar to it and therefore was unable to keep up with the flexible strategies of an Elite.

While it was possible solutions to those issues would be found in the distant future, it was currently more practical and more productive to use a single Elite to pilot an Object.

Just as the Elite girl was firing her large coilguns at the enemy Tri-Core, she received a transmission from an ally.

“Thi…Quenser. We…curr…Tri-Core…deck!”

It was a voice she had longed to hear.

Strength entered her small hands as they held the control column.

“…switch your weapon…short time whi….escape. Please switch… WL3B…! I repeat, switch…WL3B…!!”

However, the signal was so bad it was hard to tell what he was saying.

The Elite girl tilted her head in confusion.

Apparently Quenser had made it onto the Tri-Core's deck and was asking the Elite girl for cover fire. …However, the crucial weapon code had not made it through intact.

(WL3B…That would be something from the laser system.)

“Hmm…” the girl thought.

She did not have much time. The longer she took, the greater the risk of Quenser and whoever was with him being in real trouble. Pressed for time, the Elite girl made the following decision.

(I have a feeling he said WL3B2… Yeah, that had to be it!!)

She nodded once and reached for the switch to change weapons.

A sound like evaporating water reached Quenser’s ears.

It was coming from the princess’s Object.

Specifically, it was coming from a part on the surface of the spherical body that looked like a planetarium lens. Hundreds of laser beams then shot from it like a folding fan pointed forward. The orange lines this made were likely created by the dust or moisture in the air being burned.

It was the WL3B2 which was known as the Killer Squall.

It was a secondary weapon meant to annihilate flesh and blood soldiers defending a base rather than to defeat another Object.

However…

“Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!?”

While raising a shout against the scene before them, Quenser and Heivia rolled across the top of the float to escape. As they did, the many optical weapons burned across the Tri-Core’s surface.

None of the lasers pierced into the Object, but the areas of the surface struck were locally heated up like a frying pan. The cranes used for oil drilling were burned off and the few relentless soldiers who had continued to chase Quenser and Heivia from the other float practically exploded.

“What the hell!? I asked for the WL3B1s, so why is she using the WL3B2 system!? Is that princess trying to kill us!?”

“Look, hero. Isn’t there something odd about the princess’s Object!?”

When Quenser looked over at Heivia’s insistence, he saw one of the arms stretching from the Baby Magnum’s back shaking left and right as if following some kind of prey.

If they had looked at it calmly, it may have looked more like a cute feminine gesture of greeting, but they were anything but calm given the situation.

“D-dammit! Is it just me or is she aiming this way!? She’s even making slight adjustments back and forth!!”

“So we really are just expendable pawns! Screw that, I’m not gonna die here!!”

As the deadly anti-personnel lasers rained down from above, Quenser and Heivia pulled together the little amount of courage they had left and stood up. They were not facing the depths of the Tri-Core. Instead, they ran as quickly as they could toward the sea that was spread out around the Object and leapt into it, completely abandoning all of their professional duties.

No great splash was heard.

They had jumped from the Tri-Core while it was moving at around 200 kph and were pushed by the side effects of its great hovercraft-like wind that was spread out around it. Quenser and Heivia skipped a few times across the surface of the water like a flat stone thrown into a river before they finally crashed through the surface.

A tremendous explosive noise rang out.

In no time at all, they had ended up over 150 meters from the Tri-Core.

Immediately afterwards, the two Objects once again started an all-out battle between their main weapons. They had gotten a good

distance from the Tri-Core, but the vibrations that spread through the ocean waters felt as if they would shake their bodies apart.

“I’ve had enough! There’s no way we can keep up with a battle like this!!” shouted Quenser half in tears when he finally made it back above the surface.

Heivia desperately shouted from nearby, “Hey, you set up a few of the explosives before, right!? Detonate them already!! We almost died setting them up, so we have to get something out of them!!”

“Okay, partner!! This is the crystallization of our efforts!!”

Getting oddly energetic as well, Quenser unhesitatingly transmitted the detonation signal.

Immediately afterwards, crimson flames flew into the air.

One of the cylindrical oil tanks attached to the Tri-Core’s float had exploded.

The shockwave spread out evenly and struck Quenser and Heivia. Their heads were knocked under the water’s surface and they desperately made it back up like they were part of a strange game of Whac-A-Mole.

“Ueh…Shit. It just came back and hit us…”

“But doesn’t destroying that tank we’d been using as a shield count as strategic damage? After all, their objective is to carry that crude oil to an enemy base.”

“Wait a second… Even if it’s a strategy to cut off their supplies, was that really okay? I mean, won’t the oil wreak havoc on the sea?”

“I’m sure the higher ups predicted something like this would happen and have already put together a means of dealing with it. Dedicated work ships will probably go out and suck it all up after the battle’s over. If they insist we bring them all the stolen oil, we can just throw them into the sea and tell them to deal with it themselves. …Right now, I’m more interested in what happened to the Tri-Core itself.”

They then looked over at the Tri-Core that had black smoke rising from it.

They did not look pleased.

“Shit. That damn Object is perfectly fine!!”

“Yeah, I see no sign of damage to the floats. Damn, how are we supposed to sink that thing!? Is it even possible with the explosives we were given!? Dahh!! I just want to chuck it all at the thing and get the hell out of here!!”

That was when Froleytia approached them aboard a lifeboat with a small motor aboard. She took a small bite out of a piece of cheese most likely from the emergency rations and gave no sign of caring that her adult underwear could be seen through her wet uniform.

“Well, there is a chance you two might actually get out of here.”

“Froleytia!? Where have you been this whole time!?”

“Where did you find that lifeboat!? And what’s with that cheese!? Do they keep that aboard the lifeboats!? It looks way better than the rations we usually eat! I wish I got that kind of food!!”

Froleytia moved the conversation along, ignoring the two shouting idiots.

“What I told you to do was to damage the Object while we waited for the princess to show up. After blowing up that tank, our role is over. Now we just have to pass the baton over to the princess. If we wait around for a rescue helicopter, we just have to grab onto the rope, get dragged up, and fly straight for land.”

“…Assuming the helicopter isn’t knocked out of the sky due to the insane battle over there,” muttered Heivia.

The Tri-Core had moved away from them in order to engage the princess in battle, but the range of an Object’s cannons are measured in kilometers, so they were not exactly safe.

Meanwhile, a large military helicopter approached from the land's

direction. The Tri-Core's radar would of course have seen it, but it made no attempt to shoot it down. It was likely giving no attention to every little transport helicopter in order to focus on battling the Object the princess was piloting. It had already been well proven that normal soldiers, tanks, and fighters could not damage an Object. It would have been pathetic indeed to get hit by the princess's powerful main cannons while trying to shoot down a harmless fly.

The helicopter flew to a spot directly above Quenser and the others as the two boys treaded water. While it hovered about 10 meters up, a wire like those used by rescue teams was dropped straight down.

Froleytia said, "Sorry, but let's do this by order of rank. If I don't get aboard first, some complete stranger could very well label you two as subordinates so afraid for their lives that they ignored military regulations."

"If you show any sign of pulling up the wire before we're aboard, I'll stick a fuse in this Hand Axe and throw it into the helicopter," Heivia said with a completely serious expression.

Quenser stared off into the distance where the two Objects were fighting. The princess was making quick movements left and right to throw off her opponent's aim and the Tri-Core was attacking with its giant railguns while moving clockwise. There was no guaranteed winner in a battle between Objects. Who was on the offense and who was on the defense would move back and forth, giving the battle the same kind of tension as the last 10 minutes of a world cup match tied at 0.

"Don't zone out like that, Quenser!! It's your turn!!"

That shout from above brought Quenser back to his senses. He looked up and saw that Heivia and Froleytia were already inside the transport helicopter. Heivia was leaning out of the open door.

"What, do you want to stay behind and do some extra studying as a battlefield student!? A stray bullet could come this way at any time, so we can't stick around any longer!!"

Quenser frantically grabbed at the thick wire hanging nearby. A large motor started winding up the wire and Quenser was quickly brought up into the air.

After about 30 seconds, he was all the way up.

To steady the wire and his body that was shaking with it, Quenser placed his feet on the edge of the floor of the helicopter. The helicopter must have been originally intended for rescues during naval missions because inside it were diving suits, oxygen tanks, tools such as wrenches and drills that used compressed air to function underwater, and something called an aqua scooter that looked like a kickboard with a motor attached.

“Okay, we’re all aboard! Get us out of here as quickly as possible!!” said Froleytia loudly in the direction of the cockpit.

The helicopter tilted forward and started moving away from the battle between Objects.

“What a mess,” Heivia muttered as he looked down at the sea.

Around the two rampaging Objects, countless pieces of wreckage were scattered about. That wreckage was all that remained of the offshore maintenance base zones like the one Quenser and the others had been supposed to wait aboard.

“They may have been hastily constructed, but there were 20 or 30 of those things. And yet now there’s nothing left that’s staying afloat properly. Everything but the base of the pillars is at the bottom of the sea.”

“Luckily, most of the soldiers managed to jump into the sea just after the Tri-Core began its attack. That’s why so many rescue helicopters have been sent out.”

Quenser could see 40 or 50 helicopters in the direction he was looking. Most likely, as many as possible had been gathered from nearby naval ports and bases. Not all of them were dedicated rescue helicopters. Transport and reconnaissance helicopters could be seen mixed in. They were hovering and using wires to pick up soldiers

floating in the sea like how Quenser and the others had been.

“I can’t believe so many survived…” Heivia muttered.

While wiping seawater from her long kanzashi-style hairpin, Froleytia sighed and spoke.

“Objects are synonymous with war after all. Even if you linked together 10 nuclear aircraft carriers and set up a 40 meter cannon, you would not be able to defeat those monsters. Look at those movements. Not even a mixed martial arts champion can pull off footwork like that.”

After determining when the enemy would fire from the minute movements of its cannons, the princess’s Object made small, quick movements to avoid the railgun shots and return fire. The Tri-Core had realized it could not completely avoid getting hit, so it was deliberately facing its thicker armored areas to the front to avoid a fatal blow.

Just as Froleytia had said, it looked like a detailed martial arts match rather than a battle between tanks or battleships.

“Chaff or flares will not throw off their aim and hiding behind cover and using ranged attacks will not protect you. Even in a wide open battlefield like this, they can defend against and avoid attacks from main cannons that move at almost Mach 10. How are tanks or fighters supposed to take them on?”

Suddenly, Quenser practically pushed Heivia out of the way as he leaned out of the open door.

“Wait a second. Something’s odd about the princess’s movements!”

“What do you mean? It’s the same impossible-to-predict battle as ever.”

“No, Quenser’s right,” said Froleytia as she reached for some binoculars from within the helicopter. “The princess has been attacking less often for a bit now. More and more now, she’s not firing when she clearly has an open shot on the Tri-Core.”

“What does that mean?”

“Look at that!!” shouted Quenser as he pointed.

Immediately afterwards, one of the Tri-Core’s railguns fired. The shockwave produced by its nearly Mach 10 speed created a tremendous noise despite the railgun not using any kind of gunpowder to fire.

The Tri-Core was not aiming for the center of the princess’s Object.

The railgun shell was aimed for the end of the princess’s main cannons.

“…It’s decided this is going to be a long battle and is trying to wear down her attack power,” said Quenser with a groan. “The Object is covered in thick nuclear shelter-like armor, but the very end of the gun battery is different. …If I recall, one of the best strategies against an Object without using one yourself is to use a weapon that creates as much heat as a nuclear weapon and uses that to distort the shape of the Object’s weapons.”

Of course, an Object had over 100 weapons. Even if a normal army used a nuclear weapon, they would only be able to “distort” 20 or 30 percent of those. Since even one active weapon remaining would be enough to wipe out an army, that was not enough to utterly destroy an Object.

But what if that strategy was used in a battle between Objects?

Both giant Objects were covered in solid armor and the weapons the enemy could use to penetrate that armor were limited. Even if an Object had 100 weapons, only the main weapons could destroy another Object.

So what if all of the weapons that could destroy an Object were destroyed?

“Shit!! She’s gonna lose at this rate!!” shouted Heivia.

Quenser was a student who had studied the designs of Objects and Heivia was an analyst who searched for characteristics and

weaknesses of enemy Objects from data gathered on the battlefield.

That was why they understood.

The princess's Object was still fighting, but 5 of its 7 main coilguns had already been made useless. It was clear that, before long, all of the main weapons would be unusable.

Quenser watched the princess's Object as it was driven further and further into a purely defensive battle. His gaze then dropped to his own hands. The higher ups had supplied him with a large amount of the plastic explosive Hand Axe in order to damage the Tri-Core as much as possible.

"Hey, wait." A stiff smile appeared on Heivia's face when he noticed Quenser staring at the explosives. "I think I know what you're thinking, but wait. It's impossible."

"The princess will be sunk at this rate," said Quenser as he leaned even further out the door in order to check on things outside. "I have to give her some help before she loses for sure."

"You'll be killed! And we already did quite a bit!! That Tri-Core is enough of a monster to be fine even after we climbed up on its deck, set explosives, and blew up that giant oil tank! Just where do you think you're going to put those explosives on it to damage it!? In fact, just getting near that high speed battle will be enough to crush your body to a paste!!"

"But if I don't do anything, the princess will die!!" Quenser stared Heivia straight in the eye. "In Alaska, we learned better than we ever wanted to that Objects are synonymous with war. Have you already forgotten the hell that awaits the rest of the soldiers once we lose the Object!? Objects are powerful but not invincible. That means that we can't just rely on the princess but doesn't it also mean we might be able to do something about the Tri-Core!?"

"No, stop this! If we approach on this slow helicopter, we'll be shot down in no time at all!!"

"I never said anything about heading there on the helicopter."

“Stop, you idiot!! Shit!!”

Ignoring Heivia, Quenser jumped out the open door. From 10 meters up, he reached the ocean surface in only a few seconds. He broke through the surface that felt as hard as concrete and sank deep down into the water.

“Pphah! Dammit!!”

His head burst back above the surface and he looked around while treading water.

The helicopter Heivia and Froleytia were aboard showed no sign of actively supporting him, but it did not just fly off and leave him behind either.

“You softhearted idiots,” Quenser muttered with a smile.

Quenser himself had no intention of facing the Tri-Core head on.

There was no way he could win if he tried to.

No matter how noble a reason one had and no matter how many things one had to protect, an Object would slaughter a flesh-and-blood soldier without hesitation.

There was not even a hint of a chance of things conveniently working out if you tried hard enough or a miracle occurring if you fought desperately enough.

However, Quenser had learned something in Alaska.

He *did not have to* face the Object head on.

He could circle around to the back.

The element that would make the impossible possible was not strength. It was brains. He had to worry over everything as much as he could, think as hard as he could, and find some means, method, or technique with which he could defeat the enemy. Only if he thought everything through to the very last second rather than charging in desperately could he achieve an unthinkable victory.

While treading water, Quenser spoke to Heivia through his radio.

“Now then. It’s time to find a weakness. That giant Object has three reactors rather than the usual one, so maybe there’s some kind of shortcoming there.”

“You idiot. Weaknesses aren’t that easy to find. That Object was made exclusively to be used in naval battles. Unlike a Composite Multi-Role one like the princess’s, it has no design blind spots when it’s on the water. That monster was designed so it wouldn’t.”

“It was designed for naval battles… But then…”

Quenser thought as he swam a bit in the direction of the battling Objects.

(But then its movements seem a little too monotonous… Almost as if it isn’t used to fighting…)

As he watched the Tri-Core turn to the right as it followed the arcing path of the princess’s Object, Quenser suddenly stopped swimming and spoke into the radio.

“Wait… Didn’t the Tri-Core only ever turn to the right before, too?”

“Ahn?”

“Ever since the battle began, the Tri-Core has *only been turning to the right*! It’s moved slightly to the left in emergencies, but it hasn’t curved any large amount to the left this entire time, has it!?” Quenser said quickly due to his own idea making him feel impatient. “It hasn’t turned left even once from the moment it tried to crush us with its shark anchor!! When it was attacking the half-destroyed base from pointblank range, it should have just rotated clockwise or counter-clockwise, whichever way would bring one of its cannons in range fastest. However, it never once rotated counter-clockwise. No Object specialized for naval battles would lack a basic ability like that!! Something must have happened to it to keep it from turning to the left! If we could worsen whatever it is…!!”

“You say something must have happened,” Heivia said dubiously while likely leaning out the helicopter while looking through some

binoculars. “But I can’t see anything wrong with it. There’s nothing odd about its floats or air cushion. Its balance is perfectly level. At the very least, nothing is wrong with it that can be seen from here.”

“…”

Something was clearly wrong with it, but Heivia was unable to see anything.

The problem was located somewhere that could not be seen from a helicopter.

So…

“Underwater…?” Quenser muttered. “Hey, drop down that aqua scooter that was in the helicopter. It’s the thing that looks like a kickboard with a motor attached!!”

“Wh-what? If we don’t get out of here soon, the Tri-Core’s continuous right turning will put us in its path!!”

“That’s perfect!! I’ve figured out the Tri-Core’s weakness!!”

“!!”

A hunk of plastic about the size of a small drawer to a steel desk fell from the open door of the helicopter. At the same time, the helicopter quickly left the area because the Tri-Core was quickly headed that way and it was over 50 meters high itself.

Quenser grabbed the round piece of plastic floating in the water and pressed a button to bring out a hair spray can-sized oxygen tank. He put the clear mask that smelled of seawater over his mouth and hit the machine’s ignition switch to start the internal motor.

An aqua scooter was essentially exactly what Quenser had said it was: a kickboard with a motor attached. By diving down using it, he could move through the water much faster than when using only his legs.

“Quenser!! Dive!! The Tri-Core’s headed your way!!” said Heivia over the radio.

Quenser looked over and saw the 150-180 meter weapon sliding sideways toward him. It sped up from 50 kph and the cliff-like float approached at an alarming speed of about 200 kph.

The Tri-Core showed no sign of even knowing Quenser was there.

Not even the smallest of its around 100 weapons turned in his direction.

It was likely focusing on its battle with the princess's Object. It did not care if a soldier got crushed in the process.

Before, he had somehow managed to escape the Tri-Core by diving down into the water, so he frantically dove down this time as well.

However, this time he was not trying to escape.

He was heading down to cause real damage to the Tri-Core.

As he soured through the seawater, Quenser made it below the Tri-Core. …Or rather, the Tri-Core passed over him as he dove down.

Quenser maxed out the aqua scooter's thrust so as not to be left behind.

And he stared at a giant structure that had been hidden in the water.

(The shark anchors!!)

As the Tri-Core moved about to toy with the princess, Quenser aimed for the moment it had decelerated the most, let go of the aqua scooter, and grabbed onto the mine-covered net that was caught on the shark anchor. Even then, it was moving at 50 kph. It was like grabbing onto the side of a bus to hitch a free ride.

(…!? Ooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhh!!)

The shark anchor was one of the three steel pylon-like structures that stretched straight down from the three spherical main bodies of the Tri-Core. They acted as the weights that kept the Object's balance like a self-righting toy. It was a necessary part for an Object

that made sharp turns at high speed.

Each of the three shark anchors could extend and retract like a retractable baton. By changing their lengths in accordance with the Tri-Core's slant, the Object's center of gravity could be regulated. That way, it would not capsize even when quickly moving using the massive energy produced by its reactors.

The Tri-Core used the hovercraft-like method of having its main body float simply because it could move faster that way. Water resistance could be reduced as much as possible if the ship itself was not in the water.

Even so, it still had those three shark anchors that created a large amount of water resistance.

Why would it do that?

It was because the shark anchors were so important that the Object could not be piloted without them.

However…

(That functionality has been partially sealed due to the "goal tape" net getting tangled up in it.)

The Tri-Core had charged through the net because it had assumed mines would not do any real damage to it. It had been right about that. However, it had not expected for the net to get stuck in the gaps of one of the retractable shark anchors.

Due to that, that one shark anchor could no longer move.

(If the Tri-Core turns to the left too much, it will lose control of its balance and turn over. So as not to take itself out like that, the Tri-Core has been forced to fight the princess while only turning to the right!!)

When he thought about it, the Tri-Core had somehow not felt like an absolutely invincible Object when it had used long distance attacks to destroy the normal base zones Quenser and the others had been on. Normally, it would have charged into the center of the

enemy forces and blown everything away in all directions. The reason it had not done so may have been because it was afraid of getting into a situation where it would be forced to turn to the left.

But knowing that made things much easier.

(If losing control of just one shark anchor is that much of a handicap, losing another will completely destroy its balance!!)

That was why Quenser had brought all the explosives he could with him.

He had brought the plastic explosive known as Hand Axe.

He doubted the explosives would be enough to do anything about the tough Object itself, but there was something much easier to use already prepared there for him: the net covered in mines the size of the large balls used in sports festivals. The net had been so torn up that it trailed behind the shark anchor for almost 350 meters like a giant windsock.

Quenser stuck an electric fuse into the Hand Axe and placed it next to the mines.

Using them, he could sink the Tri-Core.

(Okay, that's all set up…wah!?)

The Tri-Core suddenly turned to the right sending Quenser swinging around. His hand was ripped from the net and the tremendous current created by the giant shark anchor sent him tumbling away through the water.

In no time at all, he was a good distance from the Tri-Core.

However, he had done what he had needed to do.

Quenser kicked his legs to bring his head above water and then removed the clear mask covering his face.

In his hand, he held the radio with which to send the detonation signal to the Hand Axe.

“Here goes!!”

As Quenser stared at the mountain-like presence of the Tri-Core, he pressed the button with his thumb.

A muffled explosion roared and bubbles over 10 meters across burst to the surface from below the Tri-Core.

It did not end there.

Shockwaves did not traverse only through air. The shockwave caused by the explosion rushed out and mercilessly assaulted even Quenser’s body. He doubled over in the water like he had been hit by a body blow.

The impact to the shark anchor supporting the Tri-Core’s balance caused it to stop for an instant while it turned to the right in its chase after the princess’s Object.

“Gh…Cough!?”

“Hey, did you stick the Hand Axe on the shark anchor!?”

“Yeah, and I got the giant mines to blow up with it. This should…”

“You idiot. It isn’t that easy! The Tri-Core has been moving around this whole time after plowing right through that net, setting off plenty of those mines in the process! Setting off more of them with the Hand Axe isn’t going to damage one of those giant shark anchors!!”

The Tri-Core moved one of its weapons.

It finally turned one of its over 100 weapons as if displaying its anger for a small bug that had bitten it.

It was not using one of the main cannons that was aimed at the princess’s Object.

However, anything on the Tri-Core was enough to sink a normal battleship. There was no question as to what would happen to a flesh-and-blood soldier.

“Dammit. The Tri-Core’s gotten serious!! Hey, Quenser, we’ll send out all the chaff and smoke we have, but don’t blame me if it doesn’t work!! It’s impossible to damage those shark anchors with just that kind of explosive!!” said Heivia desperately.

“That wasn’t what I was trying to do,” Quenser replied with a fearless smile on his lips. “I was trying to blow up the net caught on the Object!!”

The explosion Quenser had caused had further torn apart the giant net caught on the shark anchor, causing it to spread out.

The net had spread out like a flag waving in the wind and had entwined itself around one of the other shark anchors due to the very current created by the shark anchors.

Up until then, only one of the three shark anchors had been made useless by having the net wrapped around it.

However, Quenser had caused the net to wrap around a second one. The net made its way into the gaps in the retractable shark anchor, stopping its movements. The Object's ability to maintain its balance was further reduced.

And…

Part 7

With a tremendous roar, the Tri-Core fired at Quenser.

However, the shell did not actually hit him. A tremendous amount of water was thrown into the air and Quenser was tossed about by the great current this caused. He did not die. An invincible object had aimed for him, yet he lived on.

The reason for that was simple.

Quenser stared at the Tri-Core as it started acting oddly.

“Objects always have mass and weight on a normally unthinkable scale and the Tri-Core has three spherical main bodies. That is likely why it is exclusively used for naval battles. Any use of legs to try and support something that large on land would be crushed underneath its weight.”

An eerie creaking noise resounded throughout the battlefield.

The Tri-Core’s body had been precisely made according to its schematics and did not have even the slightest defect, but it was clearly beginning to warp bit by bit. The sight was similar to seeing a mountain range being created by tectonic plates crashing into each other. The creaking continued and the center of the A-shaped Object swelled up as if being folded symmetrically by a giant hand.

“That weight carries quite a bit of potential energy. It is one thing when it has the shark anchors to control the balance, but when those shark anchors aren’t functioning, the main body of the Tri-Core suffers when it moves that normally unthinkable weight. It’s exactly like how an aikido practitioner uses his opponent’s own weight to throw him!!”

The Object struggled.

However, it was too late.

The Tri-Core’s giant form had clearly bent into a lowercase n-shape.

Anyone could have predicted what fate awaited the Object as it continued to loudly self destruct.

A great noise reverberated across the Strait of Gibraltar.

Like something out of a wiener commercial, the Tri-Core bent past its limit and snapped in two. Bisected under its own weight, the Object started to sink deep into the sea. Its floats were smashed and its air cushion engines were no longer functioning properly, so it no longer had any way to float.

Just before the Tri-Core sank completely below the surface, a small blast came from the top and an escape device shot out. The enemy Elite pilot had given up. Quenser had defeated the Tri-Core.

Quenser looked up at the helicopter flying above his head and laughed like an idiot.

“Ha ha ha!! So you’ve finally come back, you losers!! First the Water Strider in Alaska and now this!! That’s two I’ve taken out!! How many medals am I gonna get now!? I may just be a battlefield student, but maybe now I’ll be the equivalent of a lieutenant colonel or something!”

“Wait, you idiot!! This isn’t over! You need to get out of there!!”

“Hah? The Tri-Core is on its way to the bottom of the-…”

“Yes, and a giant tsunami-like wave is spreading out in a ring from where it sank! This is something like the crater-shaped wave created when a space station falls in the ocean!!”

Quenser looked over in shock and saw a giant wall.

It was a wall of water 20 meters high.

From his position, it almost looked like a building was collapsing down on him. He could see the helicopter above frantically ascending in order to avoid getting hit by the wave.

(You’ve gotta be kidding…!)

Even the aftereffects of its defeat were enough to kill a flesh-and-blood soldier.

At the very end, Quenser was newly made aware of just how huge Objects were as the lethal wall of water struck him. All five of his senses were thrown into chaos and he became unable to tell what was going on in the outside world.

(Cough…cough!! ….!!)

Death.

Amid the chaotic sensations, that word floated up from within him.

However, Quenser was not dashed to pieces.

Something was supporting his body to prevent it from being swept away.

“…?”

After several seconds, the 20 meter wave finally passed.

Quenser looked around in confusion because he had no idea why he was still alive. Then he realized what had happened.

The princess’s Object had circled around in the direction he was being swept and had used one of the main cannon's arms to scoop him up. Quenser was draped atop the end of the 40 meter main cannon like a futon hanging to dry.

“Hi there.” He heard the princess’s voice coming from the external speakers normally used to demand trembling soldiers to surrender once the enemy Object had been blown away. “How does it feel to ride on one of the Objects you love so much?”

Part 8

And so Quenser, Heivia, and Froleytia survived. They were aboard a large transport plane that had taken off from a military base.

All three of them were holding the type of giant hamburger that completely ignored balanced nutritional needs and that they could not get while stuck on a base. Froleytia's Japan obsession showed itself once more as her burger held a Japanese tatsuta-age rather than a beef patty.

She moved her small, pale lips and said, "I thought I wouldn't be able to properly enjoy normal food after months of nothing but flavorless rations, but it seems good food is good food no matter what. Just eating this is enough to remind me that I am a living being."

"Sorry to interrupt you in the middle of some kind of philosophical dissertation, but could you not cross your legs while wearing that tight skirt? Please think about how your subordinates must feel sitting right in front of you."

"Hm? What, you don't like it? C'mon, I'm going out of my way to give you a little reward. Can you really escape the allure of this sexy zone made up of black stockings and red panties?"

"No, I feel panties aren't something that should just be out in the open like that. I mean, they need to be a rare sight that you just catch a slight glimpse of. Not that I think the sight of panties is a bad thing, but my theory is they just aren't living up to their full potential like this. They're red. And soaked with seawater. Those black synthetic fibers are torn just a bit showing some white skin… Dammit, you're right!! I am happy!! Gwaahh!!"

The slightly bluish-silver-haired and large-breasted Froleytia laughed and gave a victorious smile as she toyed with the healthy young man that was Heivia.

"Damn, my clothes *are* sticking to me uncomfortably though. Why

does seawater stick to your skin like this? Just changing clothes would be meaningless if I still reek of the beach like this. If only we had had enough time to get a shower back at the port."

"The plane has no shower room, so you'll just have to put up with it until we reach the next base."

"Not necessarily, Quenser," said Froleytia as she undid the latch on a large box on the ground nearby. She pulled out a strange item that looked like a bag that was made of water resistant material that had a watering can-like faucet attached to the bottom. "This is a simple portable shower. It seems the divers have had the same thoughts."

Froleytia moved her damp body and hung the water resistant bag from a hook on the ceiling.

"Ehh?" Heivia shouted upon seeing his superior officer pull out a kiddie pool-like object to prevent the water from spreading across the floor. "You mean…here…? We're all going to take a shower together here!? W-with pleasure, ma'am!!"

"I'll be partitioning the shower off with a curtain, so outta the way, Heivia!"

"Ghahh!?"

Heivia let out a scream as Froleytia pulled a thick plastic sheet across in front of her on a rail on the ceiling while kicking him in the side as he sat on the ground.

When he heard the sound of clothes being slipped off from behind the sheet, Heivia stopped rolling around on the ground and became completely still.

"…Shit. Talk about a cock tease."

"Y-yeah… That's right… You're completely right, Heivia."

"Eh? What kind of half-hearted reply is that? W-wait, is there a gap between the sheet and the wall over there…!?"

“Nope. Not at all. Not even slightly. Don’t worry about it.”

Froleytia’s exceedingly calm voice that was accompanied by the sound of water came from the other side of the thick sheet.

“Quenser, I only allowed you to see as far as the underwear. If you go any further, I may have to use the interrogation room afterwards.”

“Wah!! You noticed!?”

“Wait, so you *can* see!?” exclaimed Heivia.

The two idiots started struggling over that spot, but Froleytia upped her defense by using a piece of electrical tape to close the gap between the sheet and the wall. By the time Heivia managed to look over, there was nothing left to see.

“Oh, c’mon, Heivia. Is it really something worth sulking in the corner over?”

“…Leave me alone. Someone who got everything he wanted can’t understand how I feel.”

As it was not enough of an issue for him to worry about when he was so sweaty, Quenser decided to leave Heivia be. Quenser had other things to worry about.

“The princess sure has it tough,” he muttered as he glanced out the window. “It’s normally just a quick plane ride away, but they have to actually alter the landscape to transport her giant Object to the next battlefield.”

From behind the thick sheet, Froleytia turned Quenser’s words to himself into a conversation.

“And yet that thing is a monster that can rush across land or sea at the speed of a linear motor train. There are plenty of just causes for this war, but the primary reason seems to be gaining exclusive control of the best routes to efficiently move an Object to any battlefield in the world. Straits are especially desirable in that sense.”

“What, are we back to the Age of Exploration?”

Quenser was forced to reflect once more on the reasons behind the killing he had been taking part in. As he did, the thick sheet partitioning off the shower area slid to the side, revealing a fully-clothed Froleytia.

“Tah dah. Now that was refreshing. It’s a shame the only available change of clothes were unfashionable overalls, but what can you do? …By the way, Heivia, why are you sulking in the corner?”

“…Being under the command of a beauty of a superior officer comes with some serious problems,” muttered Heivia with a grim look on his face, but Froleytia only looked confused.

Quenser looked over at what she was holding.

“Froleytia, why are you hooking that tablet up to that notebook right after getting out of the shower?”

“Hm? Oh, this? I have to provide real-time long-distance orders to secure the transport route for an Object in South America and the troops supporting it. Doing this really drives home how much the power balance of the world can change based on who holds the quickest routes with which to transport Objects.”

“…I really don’t care. Just so you know, I’m never taking part in an awards ceremony again. I’m leaving!” Heivia said out of displeasure.

“You know what the military regulations are, right?”

“Fuck the regulations!! Go ahead and discharge me! If you need a reason, I’ll rape you and those giant breasts of yours right now!! I only enlisted in order to gain the experience I needed to become the next head of my noble family!! After destroying two Objects with normal firepower, I think I’ve more than done that! I’m never going back to a battlefield like that!!”

“You know, I’d say today’s victory goes to Quenser alone…”

“Yeah, in more ways than one!! I didn’t get to see anything!!”

“? I have the feeling we’re talking about two different things now… Where did you get off track, Heivia? Well, I’m not quite sure what the problem is, but quit crying.”

Froleytia had looked up from the map on the computer in confusion, but then her radio started beeping. After an exchange over the radio that was filled with special military jargon, Froleytia frowned in annoyance and finally cut the connection after giving a quick word of consent.

“It seems you’re in luck. You aren’t going to have another awards ceremony.”

“Really!? Thank goodness, I can go home! The home country is designated a safe country, so everything will be fine once I get back there!!”

“Who said you had been ordered back home? That’s been cancelled too.”

“Hah?” said Quenser and Heivia as they stared at their superior’s face.

Froleytia shrugged and responded with, “A previously inactive military country in Oceania has made a major move. Now that you two have destroyed two Objects, it looks like the higher ups have really taken a liking to you. They referred to you by name when they asked to have you sent straight to Oceania.”

“Fuck that!”

“Let me off!”

“I’ll hijack this plane!”

The two soldiers shouted in protest, but the large transport plane’s route could not be changed. It seemed some distant person was controlling the plane’s route remotely by drawing a line on a map on a computer.

Chapter 3: War of the Ant and the Grasshopper > > Battle to Defeat an Oceanian Military Nation

Part 1

An Oceanian military nation existed in a land famous for koalas and kangaroos. In the age when a country known as Australia had existed there, the cities had primarily existed on the coastal border areas and the central area had mostly been a dry, cracked wasteland that looked like something out of a Western. Even if the areas were not full-blown deserts, the dry, hard ground could only support undergrowth, so both growing crops and building up a modern city had been difficult.

However, modern times had overturned that situation.

Artificial soil with high water retention had been developed and many genetically improved plant cultivars were able to carry out urban greening even in harsh climates. Using these and other methods, a large scale plan to improve Oceania's environment had been developed. With the improvements to the soil, the previously barren inner lands could be made able to produce large amounts of crops and the people who profited from those crops could build large cities and connect them with a traffic network. By drawing out the resources hidden within the earth, the country's economy could flourish, and its position in the international community could rise. If it had all gone according to plan, no one would have even thought of targeting that nation with an Object.

However, it did not go according to plan.

The tribes that had lived in Oceania since ancient times felt it necessary to preserve Oceania's original state. Their religious beliefs led them to view the natural state of the land as precious and noble no matter how barren that left it. As such, they refused to let the land be covered in non-native or genetically improved plants. The tribes could not bear to have their land "eaten away" just to make money, so they began carrying out completely peaceful demonstrations and protests. The military nation was lost in its greed for the profits the development of the land would produce, so they responded in a truly simple fashion.

They sent an Object after them.

“That is what is known as the Forest Conservation that began two years ago. And so a coalition force intervened to protect the tribes from the tyranny of that military nation,” said Heivia within the sand-covered maintenance base zone.

Standing next to him, Quenser said, “Huh? This all started two years ago? Then why are we only being called in now?”

“How should I know? There must have been some new development. Something that requires finishing them off.”

The balance of power within Oceania was incredibly easy to see. The areas under control of the military nation were covered in green while the areas under control of the coalition force (and the tribes that refused to support the military nation) were covered in desert. They were also separated by whether they were willing to slaughter an opposing force for nothing more than the profit gained from food and lumber.

Objects from various different forces were kept within that coalition base zone on the front line. Normally, those Objects would likely have been on opposing sides, but they were currently lined up next to each other.

The soil there was of course arid. In accordance with the demands of the tribes, they only cleared away the vegetation that had not existed in Oceania since ancient times.

“Why is it so damn hot? Weren’t we just freezing our asses off in Alaska not too long ago?”

“The seasons in the southern hemisphere are reversed, you idiot. But I suppose this weather is actually a little more suited to a miniskirt Santa.” Quenser looked around while wiping a mixture of sweat and sand from his face. “Y’know, we sure have a lot of Objects on our side this time. Maybe we can finally get by without having to charge in ourselves.”

“Don’t be stupid. Have you forgotten how many times our

expectations have been horribly, horribly betrayed? It's probably more realistic to think of more allies as something that increases the chances of getting stepped on accidentally."

"The coalition force has sent countless Objects against bases in order to crush the dictatorship here, right? But what about the white flag? War these days is based on battles between Objects, so is it really okay to attack bases with only flesh-and-blood people in them?"

"Don't ask me. It's probably just some kind of extreme exception. Have you seen what nations make up this coalition? I can't believe we've been working together with dangerous countries like that for two years now. This Oceanian dictatorship must really be hated by the international community. …Also, I doubt the Oceanians have ever raised the white flag. They've done some pretty nasty things, so I doubt anyone would let them in even if they did flee the country."

While listening to Heivia, Quenser leaned up against the synthetic fiber barricade spread around the base and stuck something like a giant rectangular eraser into his mouth.

"Hm, the rations are as disgusting as ever, so that's something."

"Yeah, but now we get a coating of sand to add to the flavor."

"I just want to go home."

"The higher ups are carrying out firefights using the communication function on handheld game systems."

While they muttered various complaints, they heard the barricade creak.

They turned around to find a local girl of about 10 grabbing onto the barricade from outside and staring up at them.

"What are those?" the girl asked while innocently pointing at the coalition Objects being moved within the base zone.

Quenser and Heivia were unsure how to respond.

However, the girl did not seem to mind and pressed a picture book up against the barricade.

“It’s them, isn’t it? They’re the kind beasts of the rocks in this story.”

“Y-yeah, that’s what they are. They’re providing shelter for the squirrels and kangaroos in case it rains.”

Quenser could not bear to tell her they were weapons of mass destruction and were anything but kind. To his annoyance, Heivia gave him a look that seemed to say, “Nice one, Quenser!!”

Next, a number of trails of white smoke were fired up into the air within the base zone.

The girl pointed up into the sky and asked, “And what are those?”

Quenser absolutely refused to tell her they were a new model of sensor-type meteorological missiles being tested.

“Th-they’re rockets…which are sort of like a relative of a space shuttle…I guess?”

“Wow, I’ve never seen one before.”

As the girl’s eyes glittered in excitement, the two boys averted their gaze.

That was when their superior officer, Froleytia, arrived.

“Hey, you idiots, don’t sit around chatting by the barricade. Stay focused.”

The girl outside the barricade responded more quickly than Froleytia’s subordinates. She jumped in fright and ran off as quickly as she could.

Quenser and Heivia stared silently at Froleytia for a bit.

“…What a waste.”

"…There's no helping it. She may be beautiful, but she's still a strict commander. Even a mixed martial artist would probably lose his nerve when faced with this aura."

"Oh, do you want to see my nice side? I can give you an introduction using the heel of my boot if you like. But for now, don't hang around near the barricade. This is a battlefield, remember?"

"We'll be fine. Even in a military nation like this, I doubt a mere sniper is going to target a base filled with so many Objects."

"That's not what I meant. The base is being targeted by cameras." Froleytia seemed frustrated, but despite the heat, she did not undo even a single button of the military uniform constraining her giant breasts. "A surprising number of foreign reporters have gathered, saying they will expose the tyranny of the military nation. However, they are mostly spoiled brats from safe countries that have never seen war and the rest are people who I seriously doubt are reporters."

"Oh, you mean the people who act as battlefield guides now that Objects have made mercenaries obsolete?" asked Heivia.

"Seems that way," agreed Froleytia. "The problem is that the military's safety protocols don't allow us to let them into the areas ruled by the military nation, so they have nothing to do. Occasionally, they will turn their cameras our way, hoping to get a shot that will be worth some money. If you don't want your stupid face showing up alongside a satirical article in the home country, make sure to be in top form while outside."

"…God, what a pain. Can't you ban photography of the base saying it's a necessary security measure to preserve classified information on the Objects or something?"

Froleytia thought she felt a headache coming on when she heard Quenser's amateurish suggestion.

"What do you think the coalition is for? The home country could end this infighting on its own if need be, but the higher ups want a

grand image of the heroes of justice on parade. If we banned photography, the candidates desperately campaigning for the council positions back home would be upset. Councilor Flide and the others are extremely on edge."

"Hadn't you heard, Quenser? They're doing all sorts of things for the press. There was even talk of having decals for high-paying companies or political parties put on the Object's armor like F1 racers or something."

"What, are they planning to send the image of bases being attacked and soldiers being shot to pieces into people's living rooms? They don't understand what war is like."

That comment of Quenser's may have sounded like something any other soldier would have said, but he was technically still a mere battlefield student. The know-it-all expression he had as he made his complaint was more the trait of a peaceful citizen.

Fed up with that discussion, Heivia changed the subject.

"Hey, did you see those boats from an anti-war group racing around in the ocean? They had those huge banners insisting the coalition forces end the invasion that was made up of an overwhelming force of Objects."

"They're either a bunch of idiots who don't know what's going on inside the military nation or a bunch of self-centered bastards who know but don't care. Do we really need to pay any attention to them? In fact, I'm willing to bet they would ask us why didn't we attack the military nation sooner, the second a torpedo from that nation sinks one of them."

With a displeased expression, Froleytia spoke up, "The Council elections back in the home country are coming up soon. As I said, Councilor Flide and the others are on edge to ensure they don't gain any kind of negative image. It's possible they really are planning an operation to provide relief to that ignorant anti-war group."

"Oh c'mon. We come all the way to the battlefield and we have to babysit some idiots?" complained the two boys.

Froleytia glanced up toward the sun that was beginning to sink.

“You two will be taking part in a mission that begins at sunset, so you need to prepare yourselves now. An official briefing is being held this evening, so make sure you are fully equipped by then.”

“Wait, ‘you two’? Froleytia, are you just going to be sitting in an air-conditioned room waiting for the result?” asked Heivia while pouting his lips.

Froleytia shrugged and said, “Would you rather help us out here? It isn’t easy holding back the third-rate reporters who want to be battlefield cameramen and keep ignoring the military safety protocols and heading for the front lines. They all think us soldiers are something like tour guides. Whenever their freedom is infringed on even slightly, they call to complain as if we were a customer service center. Do you want to see the true face of pacifism while you have people spit in your face and are unable to strike back?”

Quenser and Heivia grimaced at the thought.

Part 2

Inside the coalition maintenance base zone, the characteristics of the equipment found within the same class of facility varied depending on which force they belonged to. An Elite girl who was called the princess by others stood within a detached portion of the base zone created from multiple large vehicles.

Multiple such facilities existed and the one the princess was currently inside was not the enormous one that contained her personal Object, the Baby Magnum. She was in a special facility located next to the one for the Object. This one was for maintaining the Elite pilot's body.

The area was so large it was hard to believe it was inside a vehicle and it contained a clear semi-circle dome about 10 meters across. The Elite girl was standing in the middle of that dome and countless devices and human eyes were observing her from outside the dome. The people were from the medical team that looked after the Elite girl's health.

The old lady that normally maintained the Object was mixed in with the medical team and she operated a device that looked like the kind of recording console used to dub animation or movies.

"Okay, let's get started. Have you finished preparing the instrument?" said the old lady.

Her voice was not transmitted by sound. Instead, orange words were displayed on the inner clear wall of the dome. This was because the dome was soundproofed. The girl read the words that scrolled across like on an electric scoreboard. As a music score raced across the clear and thin monitor before her eyes, she put on the special goggles also used to pilot the Object.

She held up a long, thin silver flute and entered text by having the infrared input function of the goggles read the motion of her eyes.

"*Tuning of the flute is complete*," she wrote.

“I take it there are no issues with the score either. In that case, let the metronome go. You can begin your performance whenever you like.”

Having read the old lady’s words, the princess lightly let fly the paper airplane she held in one hand. While watching the papercraft gently arcing through the air, she held the silver flute horizontally up to her mouth.

She blew into it and moved her white fingers.

A small noise was emitted and the nose of the paper airplane tilted up slightly. It was made of a special material that was distorted by sound waves.

“Yes, yes, that’s good. Bring the metronome into a 5 meter radius loop at an altitude of 140 centimeters, completing one loop every 30 seconds.”

“*Inartistic performances like that are boring*.”

With the flute still to her mouth, the princess continued moving her eyes to continue the conversation. Notes moved dizzyingly across the monitor displaying the score, but there was no uncertainty in the movement of her fingers. It was less like the movements of a music-loving musician and more like the movements of a robot arm accurately soldering items to a circuit board in a semiconductor plant.

“Does it feel good to be surrounded by sound like that?”

“*You mean the point vibrations of the dome and the sound I am creating? If I was satisfied with only that, I would feel like I was insulting orchestras*.”

There was no standard method of regulating an Elite’s body. Nor was there merely a different set of standards for each army or nation. The ideal method was built up specifically for each individual Elite. For one person, it was to continually swim within a large pool, aiming for the fastest time. For another, it was solving every single problem on an answer sheet similar to a college

entrance exam. For another, it was playing chess against a super computer. And for someone like the princess, it was to surround oneself in carefully modulated sound.

“Do you have a complaint with the instrument? For a change of pace, you could always try using the electric guitar.”

“*Having the sound of my breath mixed in would have an effect on the regulation. I am using the flute because the breaths are written into the music*.”

Other sounds could not be mixed in with the music. She could talk with no problem by taking breaks from playing, but the regulation could not continue during those breaks.

That was why the Elite girl was going through the annoyance of speaking with her eyes while playing with her mouth. Eventually, she reached the final note and that stage of the regulation was complete. The princess removed the flute from her mouth and the paper airplane that had been kept aloft by the music slowly fell to the floor.

The princess picked up the metronome and prepared for the next song, but then she suddenly looked up. Through the clear dome, she had spotted a familiar face entering through the open door of the large vehicle.

It was Quenser.

He was being pushed forward by his companion Heivia and his expression made it seem he did not know why he was there. Seeing that, the princess silently nodded.

(Heivia can be rough, but he is certainly considerate.)

Among the group monitoring her, only the non-medical old lady seemed to notice the change in her mental state. The orange text read, “How about we take a short break,” and the soundproofed door of the clear dome opened automatically.

Quenser entered and the princess moved her eyes to give instructions to the dome. Immediately afterwards, the polarization

of the clear dome walls changed, making them white.

“Wah!” shouted Quenser in surprise as he looked around.

The princess approached him and said, “What are you here for today?”

“Oh, Heivia was saying something about us needing to drop by and remind you not to step on us since we’re going to be on a mission together.”

(What kind of brute does that person think I am?)

The princess was a tad miffed.

Oblivious to that fact, Quenser looked at the silver flute the princess held.

“Hehh. Is that a flute? I saw people using them in a wind orchestra back in the safe country, but I just couldn’t figure out how they were using them. I probably wouldn’t even be able to make a noise if I tried.”

“It is easier than it looks. Do you want to try?” asked the Elite girl and Quenser’s face lit up even more than she had expected.

That was enough to bring the princess back into a good mood, but…

“You hold a flute to the side, right? Huh? Does it go to the right or the left?”

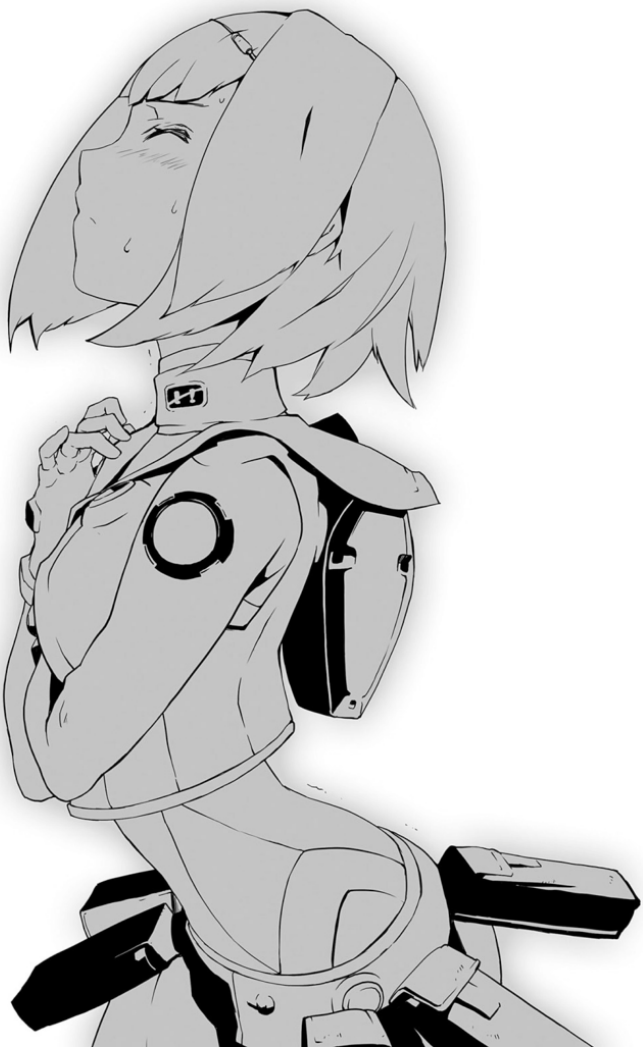
Before she could say anything, Quenser innocently brought the flute to his mouth.

She had been planning to at least wipe the mouthpiece off before handing it to him, so she was stunned and stood with a blank look and a blush on her face. However, an even greater shock ran through her soon after.

The girl was having her body regulated by the sound of the instrument, so just as a small, stupid sound escaped the flute, a

sudden deluge of strange feelings assaulted her spine.

“…!?”



The princess’s mouth wordlessly opened and closed as she curled up her spine. A specific suggestion command would release her from the regulatory effects of the flute, but she had completely forgotten to give the command.

As a soft, charming light appeared in her eye and the light of reason tried to deny it, the girl's body stiffened, but Quenser was as clueless as ever.

As he tried to accurately produce the "do re mi fa sol la si do" scale, the strengths of the breaths he was using were completely wrong.

"Huh? The notes aren't coming out right. They're distorted. And how am I supposed to press down to made a 'do'?"

With each grating noise produced by the flute, the princess's body trembled unnaturally. A glossy light peach color appeared in her white cheeks and tears appeared in the edges of her eyes. Her slender arms and legs turned inward against her wishes. As the girl rubbed her thighs together, she had no idea why she naturally wanted to do so.

"Do re mi…fa? Is this 'fa'? …Huh?"

Finally, Quenser noticed something was wrong.

The princess blushed even further due to the conflict between relief and embarrassment at his finally noticing.

"A-are you okay? Do you need to use the bathroom?" asked Quenser with a worried expression as he looked at her face.

Immediately afterwards, the elite girl did something she did not often do.

She punched a human being directly with her small fist.

Part 3

The sun began sinking below the horizon.

As Quenser stood in that wild land that was being dyed orange, Heivia spoke out to him.

“Come to think of it, what exactly are we going to be doing?”

“Isn’t that what we’re about to find out at the briefing?”

“I’m sure the various coalition dignitaries are plotting to have their own Object take all the glory. Don’t you think there’s gonna be some argument over who gets to finish off the enemy?”

“We can only pray an actual fight doesn’t break out like dogs going after some meat.”

As Quenser walked along, he pulled out a folded up map. It was of the Oceanian military nation. When Heivia saw the old map, an annoyed expression appeared on his face.

“What the hell are you doing? Did you lose your handheld?”

“If the battery dies or sand gets in it, it’ll be useless. If you don’t learn when to use digital means and when to use analog means, you’ll get yourself killed.” As he spoke, Quenser refolded the small map like someone reading a newspaper on a crowded train. “From what the people maintaining the princess’s Object said, the plan is to attack the Oceanian military nation’s secret base and blow away the enemy Object.” Heivia peered over at the map from the side as Quenser continued to speak. “According to the higher up’s information, the Oceanian military nation’s level of tech is actually quite low. It’s to the point where we’re not even sure if they could create an Object or not. The electronic simulation group has created an estimated design for the enemy Object based on what has been brought into or developed here, and it only comes out to what they’re calling Generation 0.5. Basically, their level of tech is too low to evenly give the Object normal functionality, so it’s really just

a piece of junk. The armor is especially crudely made, so the analysis says a nuclear warhead might actually be enough to destroy it."

"Then this should be easy. We have a coalition force giving us over 20 Objects spread out across Oceania. Objects are synonymous with war, so we can crush Oceania by numbers alone, right?"

"Actually, they say it isn't going to be that easy."

Quenser showed the folded map to Heivia.

It had red circles in places.

"The Oceanian military nation knows that their precious Object will be destroyed in an instant if we attack in earnest, so they've hidden where its base is. That's why, even with all the Objects we have, we can't attack it right away."

"Ahn? But I thought an operation was beginning at sunset. Surely that means we know where this secret base is, right?"

"We have a possible candidate." Quenser pointed at one of the red circles on the map. "It seems the Oceanians have constructed fake base zones across the land to throw off our analysis. We've attacked what looks like a base zone a few times, but they've ended up being completely empty. They were talking about having done a more thorough investigation this time, but they must still not know if this one is real or not."

"Objects are fucking huge. Can't they tell where it is from the satellites?"

"That's been used against us. The higher ups have gotten all excited upon seeing a giant 50 meter form and sent out a large force only to find a giant gas tank covered in decorations. From what I heard, those in charge of monitoring the satellites broke out crying in humiliation."

"That's quite the indirect attack," replied Heivia.

The military nation had scattered dummy gas tanks about Oceania

because they knew they were being monitored by satellite. Apparently, they had been trying to say, “Look how many Objects we have. Wah hah hah!”

Of course, the coalition force was not stupid enough to fall for all the dummies, but they still had to act carefully because they never knew when what they were approaching would turn out to be the real Object. This needlessly wore down the soldiers’ morale and rapidly consumed the people’s tax money. Because of all this, the higher ups just wanted to bring the war to an end quickly.

“So this is likely to end up being nothing but target practice against fakes?”

“The worst part is that looking at it like that could easily get you blown to pieces.”

No longer needing it, Quenser folded the map up even smaller and stuffed it in his back pocket.

Heivia looked around the area and said, “By the way, we’re working with a coalition force this time, right? So there’ll be Objects other than the princess’s. I hope we don’t end up working alongside a country we ran into in Alaska or Gibraltar. I’d rather not have a supposed ally shoot me in the back over personal issues.”

“Are you sure you want to ask that? You aren’t going to like the answer. I asked the same thing to the princess’s Object’s maintenance team. It’s only a rumor, but-…”

Before Quenser could continue, a giant building passed by in front of them.

Actually, it was an Object.

The giant 50 meter form passing by was all it took to blow sand up into the air like a sandstorm, but Quenser and Heivia had more important things to worry about.

The flag printed on the Object’s armor was enough to almost give Heivia a heart attack.

“Gyahhh!? You’ve gotta be kidding me! That’s the Information Alliance!!”

“Yeah, I just heard about it before. It seems we’re working with those crazy people.”

The Object’s information collection devices must have picked up their voices because the 50 meter form slowed as if in response and a female voice was transmitted over a speaker.

“My, my. If it isn’t the dogs of the Legitimacy Kingdom’s military. It seems we will be working together. Oh ho ho.”

The Object’s air cushion engine keeping it afloat then blew out extra air, blowing even more sand about and making Quenser and Heivia cough.

“Dammit. This is why they shouldn’t let immature people pilot Objects!! Do we really have to go on this mission along with someone like that!?”

“It’s still better than dealing with the Capitalist Corporations or the Faith Organization, so you should probably quit complaining.”

A satirical journalist had once likened the world map of that age to stained glass. Where it had once been divided into many small nations, it was now divided into just a few “colors” showing what group was in charge.

One was a group that insisted the accuracy of information was what determined good and evil and that was trying to create a network that covered the world. One was a collection of super capitalist corporations that felt the amount of money in one’s bank account determined your precedence in the world and what human rights you had. One was a kingdom that was a collection of cultures that wanted to resurrect the old system where legitimacy of one’s bloodline and one’s honor determined one’s social standing.

Food shortages, energy shortages, increasing populations, and many other things were touted as the “official reasons” for the world ending up like that, but it seemed the real reason was the failure

and utter shattering of the United Nations in the first half of the 21st century. The shattered pieces continued on in the directions they wanted and eventually reformed into a few different alliances.

No longer did a map of the world's power balance have a single continent simply filled in with one color. Instead, the countries of a single area freely joined whatever force they wished, making the power balance overcome geographic boundaries. This indeed made the map look something like stained glass. As this made neighboring countries often also be enemies, small scale battles were quite common in that world.

However, all of this had become completely normal by the time Quenser had been born, so he could only tilt his head to the side in confusion when the elderly shook their heads, fed up with it all.

"However, two Objects are being used for this operation, so I doubt flesh-and-blood soldiers like you will even be needed. Oh ho ho," said the Object pilot.

"Then can we just go to bed?"

Part 4

After the briefing where the coalition dignitaries came into conflict with their desire to have their own Object take all the glory, Quenser and the other soldiers like him exited the building, feeling incredibly bored.

The sun had completely set and darkness filled the sky.

It was time for the operation to begin.

“Oh, god. Why does the target site have to be 2 kilometers southwest of here? Two kilometers! Can’t the higher ups get us some trucks!?” shouted out Quenser without thinking.

Heivia shook his head and said, “They actually did, but it’s all they can do to carry the Information Alliance unit with their heavy powered suits. See how the tires are about to burst already?”

“They have motors and fibrous springs to supplement their strength, so why can’t *they* be the ones to walk? And what are they gonna use those for in an Object vs. Object battle anyway?”

“That’s a reconnaissance unit equipped with extremely high performance high speed cameras. They analyze the minute movements of the enemy Object’s main gun and lenses and send that information to their Object to help with timing for evasion and defense. At the very least, they’ll be more help in a battle than us. Although they do tend to get targeted first due to their annoying interference.”

However, it was not just the foot soldiers who were annoyed with the arrangement.

The giant Objects that could pull off speeds on the level of a linear motor train had to match the speed of the foot soldiers. They occasionally made small movements that were reminiscent of a human tapping their foot impatiently while waiting for someone.

Two Objects flanked the foot soldiers on opposite sides.

The first was the princess from the Legitimacy Kingdom army.

The other was the Elite from the Information Alliance army that Quenser and Heivia had met before.

The two Objects must have used different forms of propulsion because the rumbling sound similar to dark thunderclouds only came from the princess's Object.

To distract himself from his irritation and because of the odd sense of connection due to fighting alongside each other (even if the team had been thrown together at the last second), Quenser decided to speak to the Information Alliance Object.

It was also possible he was merely curious due to the fact that he would normally be unable to approach (for fear of getting blown to pieces) an Object from the Information Alliance.

"Hey, is it true that the Information Alliance military is developing a human-shaped Object?"

"Oh ho ho. That is obviously an ugly lie. It may be technically possible, but its center of gravity would be too high, so it would fall over too easily."

"That's no fun. Then is the rumor about your Objects having power outlets false too?"

"That one is true. Just like with a blast furnace, an Object's reactor is more efficient if it is left on 24/7 rather than switching it on and off. As such, there is spare energy that can be spread around while on standby in the base. Oh ho ho."

"You travel on land for long periods of time using propulsion from an air cushion engine that uses pure air pressure rather than static electricity. When you go all out, it seems like the excess energy would be enough to blow any surrounding soldiers away."

"When travelling alongside soldiers, the air cushion engine is only used to lessen the weight a bit so treads are enough to propel the

Object. Oh ho ho. That way the surrounding air is not disturbed too much and soldiers can travel alongside it."

"Hehh. So that's how the Information Alliance does things these days."

"I like the look of that admiring gaze. Oh, and to allow the air cushion engine to work to its fullest, the body is lightened by using carbon and aramid materials for portions of the armor. Oh ho ho."

"By the way, all this walking is exhausting, so could I hitch a ride?"

"Oh ho ho. Such a small weight would hardly be an issue, so feel free to grab on."

Quenser grabbed onto the urethane-like material of the air cushion engine and Heivia suddenly quietly shouted over at him.

"(Hey! That's not a good idea, Quenser!!)"

"(What? You mean because the Information Alliance intelligence unit is glaring at me in fear that some information will be leaked?)"

"(Yes, well, the fact that they're actually staring at your face through their scopes *is* a problem, but the bigger problem is that our princess seems to have gotten into a really bad mood for some reason!!)"

"(…Hah?)"

Having completely climbed on top of the military urethane material used on the air cushion engine, Quenser looked over at the other Object in confusion.

He saw the princess's Object moving as if shaking its head.

"Nothing is the matter," she said.

"Gwaahh!? The shaking of the Object is causing the air pressure and repellent spray to blow sand everywhere!!" shouted Heivia from the ground and all the soldiers still in proper formation started coughing. Quenser had managed to avoid the issues by climbing up

a few meters from the ground. “Quenser! If you want to prevent any more damage, go grab onto the princess’s Object!!”

“But doesn’t hers use static electricity and lasers for propulsion? It distorts lasers like crazy with metal plates to heat up the air and detonate it. I think that would be dangerous to get anywhere near.”

“Cough cough!! Y-yeah well, this sand hell is pretty dangerous, too!”

That was when the Information Alliance Elite girl spoke up.

“This kind of casual attentiveness and nonchalant kindness is important to gain trust amongst us soldiers. Oh ho ho. I suppose the unrefined Elite of the Legitimacy Kingdom simply does not understand that.”

“I said it was nothing. …Are you mocking me?” replied the princess.

“Please, Quenser!! Come down!! Don’t provoke the princess and the other Elite any further!! At this rate, we’re all going to be slaughtered while caught between two battling Objects!!”

“?”

Quenser could hear the shouting from down below, but he had no intention of going back to travelling on foot with all the heavy equipment he was weighed down with. He lay down on top of the urethane with the intent of making himself comfortable until they arrived.

Part 5

It was easy to tell who controlled which portions of Oceania.

The areas controlled by the military nation were covered in forest while the areas controlled by the coalition forces were covered in desert.

Quenser and the others were in the green forest.

At first, they had been travelling across cracked, arid land, but after crossing a certain line, the land became covered in grass. After that, the land quickly became covered in a thick forest. The state of the soil completely changed depending on whether the artificial soil that had high water retention had been distributed in that area or not. It was no surprise that the tribes that had loved the natural land there for over 1000 years saw the unnatural sight of those plants foreign to that continent as a desecration of the land.

Quenser got down off the urethane portion of the Object and looked around.

“Now then, the battlefield lies just ahead. Although I suppose we’ll just be sitting idly by and leaving everything to the real stars of the show.”

“…I’d rather you just left right now,” muttered Heivia.

Unbeknownst to Quenser, Heivia had had a horrible time trapped between the two Objects while Quenser relaxed atop one of them.

Heivia looked around too and said, “Y’know, this really is one hell of a forest. They improved the genetics for the sake of urban greening, right? I can’t believe this was originally a desert.”

“Don’t be stupid. Even if they altered their growth rate, they couldn’t have grown trees with trunks that large. The shorter trees are one thing, but these ones that look at least 100 years old were probably swiped from other countries in the area.”

The princess then spoke through the speakers on her Object.

“We are going to head out. Be careful and make sure you are not taken out by stray shots or radiant heat.”

“Thanks for the concern, but doesn’t that just mean we’re useless?”

“Oh ho ho. You can just wait here while completing a 10-minute brain training or something.”

The two giant Objects then charged off into the thick forest at high speed. Quenser and the others were left with only the trailing sound of dark thunderclouds that came from the princess’s Object.

Those giant machines that have main bodies over 50 meters across had headed off at 200-300 kph. The artificially-grown large trees snapped like chopsticks as the giant masses passed by. Before long, there was a flattened path through the forest.

Their target was a collection of rectangular concrete buildings in the middle of the thick forest.

An alarm started blaring in the military facility as those cutting-edge weapons of massacre approached.

Quenser pulled out a pair of binoculars and Heivia spoke to him, sounding annoyed.

“I’m betting this one’s another miss. If the Oceanian Object was really here, it would have left a path through the forest. You saw how the princess’s Object snapped all those huge trees, right?”

“No, I’m observing the Information Alliance Object,” responded Quenser as he adjusted the magnification of the binoculars. “If it was attacking us as an enemy, I wouldn’t have a chance to calmly analyze it, but this is different. This is a good chance to study it. I can take my time and visually steal information on their tech.”

“What, are you that crazy about some foreign girl’s sexy dress? C’mon, if you keep chasing after her, our cute princess is going to kill you.”

“What is it you keep going on about lately?”

As they spoke, the battle began between the coalition Objects and the normal soldiers in the Oceanian base.

From the looks of things, the enemy’s Generation 0.5 Object was not there.

The inevitable result of the battle was as plain as day.

Explosive beams of light covered the battlefield, ripping through the night sky.

They were being fired by a rapid fire beam cannon.

It was a powerful beam cannon that fired continuously at extremely short intervals.

The Information Alliance’s Object’s 35-meter main gun was made up of five giant rapid fire beam cannons linked together like a Gatling gun. Some people might wonder why it was necessary to construct a Gatling gun-like device when the weapons fired beams rather than metal bullets, but the powerful beam weapons would damage their barrels and other equipment if fired at too short an interval. Also, they used large amplifiers to instantaneously amplify and release electric power, so it was important to switch on and off in short intervals to divide up the burden on each individual cannon.

Supposedly, the Information Alliance Object could use those five cannons to fire those rapid fire beams indefinitely.

As the strips of bluish-white energy sliced through the night sky, the thick concrete buildings were ripped apart one by one. The wreckage that was blown into the air like in a volcanic eruption was almost entirely melted around the edges. The Oceanians tried to return fire with tanks and missile launching vehicles, but the Objects paid them no heed. The wreckage of the buildings raining down from the sky was enough to blow up the armored vehicles.

By the way, the princess’s Object was not merely watching all this go on.

It was using its quick maneuverability to cut off the escape path of the fleeing tank unit and firing at them from its 7 arm-shaped main guns. The princess's main guns could switch out their devices like a microscope switching out its lens. By rotating the core of the barrel, she could attack using laser beams, low-stability plasma cannons, coil guns, or a number of other options. That was why her Object was known as a composite model.

Explosions, beams of light, and great roaring noises split through the battlefield, but no screams could be heard.

The shouts of anger and terror were likely there, but the sounds of destruction caused by the Objects drowned them all out.

The scene was overwhelming in just about every way.

It was a hellish sight that made one renew one's desire to never stand before one of those monsters.

"Wow. I guess this is what the Oceanians get for ignoring all war treaties and just doing what they want. But I kind of feel sorry for them because I know what it's like to not be able to use the white flag."

"I can see why the princess warned us to not get caught up in it all. Hey, Quenser, can you tell how that giant Gatling gun works? It'd be pretty cool if we could have that as one of the princess's options."

"Eh? I'm more interested in what's going on down below," said Quenser while removing his eyes from the binoculars and pointing toward the Information Alliance Object. "I was thinking about why it would use both the air cushion and the treads, but I think I figured it out. Hovering with the air cushion is its basic means of propulsion, but it uses the treads to strike the ground and give it some instantaneous thrust for when it needs to make a quick dash. In fact, those look more like chainsaws than treads."

"So what would happen if we put something like that on the princess's?"

“She’d be able to get quick bursts of speed. Like this: whoosh.”

As Quenser and Heivia continued their idiotic conversation, the battle came to an end.

The enemy had been annihilated and not a single ally had been killed or even injured.

It had been the kind of ideal usage of Objects that would probably make the higher ups clap their hands in joy. No result could seem more reliable to those who fought alongside the Objects.

The Elites’ voices then came in across the radio.

“Hey, we’re done.”

“Oh ho ho. I did a scan with my sensors, but still be on the lookout for landmines or enemy troops waiting in ambush. …That is what it means to be truly concerned for others, you unrefined Legitimacy Kingdom Elite.”

Upon seeing the two Objects banging into each other, the soldiers started whispering things like “Looks like it’s still dangerous” and “Let’s just wait a bit longer”.

However, military actions were not something a soldier could simply refuse to do.

Quenser and the others headed toward the battlefield along the path of snapped trees left by the Objects. They felt safe because they assumed any traps would have been destroyed by the giant Objects heading through. Of course, this did not guarantee their safety, but it made them feel safer nonetheless.

When they arrived, the princess spoke through her speakers.

“It seems this was another dummy base. It did not have the functionality a base zone would require and the Oceanian Object was not here.”

“We’ll do a search just to be sure, but it really doesn’t seem there’s a space large enough to hide something that huge,” replied Quenser

while looking around.

The area had not simply been burned down.

The buildings had been blown away, the asphalt had been torn up, and the ground itself had been split wide open in places. Trees, steel, and everything else was burned black and had lost their original shapes. The level of destruction seen there could not be achieved even by setting fire to a petrochemical complex.

It was simpler than a nuclear weapon, more powerful than a nuclear weapon, safer than a nuclear weapon, and destroyed its target with more pinpoint accuracy than a nuclear weapon.

The enemy soldiers had been blown to such small pieces that it was impossible to tell where their bodies were.

“Uehh…” groaned Heivia. “I’m glad we finished talking about our military rations before coming here. I heard the Information Alliance military has flavored powder to put on their rations. You can choose curry or cheese or whatever flavor you want.”

“I get the feeling that their grilled flavors aren’t going to be too popular for a while.” Quenser looked up at the two Objects. “By the way, what are we supposed to do now that you finished the battle so easily? Will we be leaving after we finish searching around the area to make sure there isn’t an underground Object maintenance base zone?”

“Oh ho ho. I doubt there are any weapons nearby that are on a large enough scale to destroy an Object, but would you please be on the lookout?” replied the Information Alliance Elite.

“?”

“I merely want to take a bit of a rest after going all out in that battle. Oh ho ho.”

“I see. Are the extra g’s from inertia wearing you down?”

The designs of the special suits for Elites differed from Elite to Elite, but for the most part, they were all pressure-resistant like an air

force pilot's suit. Objects did not move around at supersonic speeds like a fighter, but they had an extremely huge mass. To simplify the problem, think of it like a metal ball on a chain. The pull would be greater the faster the metal ball was moved around by centrifugal force and the heavier the metal ball was.

Quenser realized that the Information Alliance Object and the princess's Object had been completely motionless for a while.

"Oh ho ho. If I had to fight, I could, but staying on edge like that when no enemies are around would be foolish. And Elite suits are very tight around the legs."

"Oh, that's right. When you're moving around at high speed, they cut off the flow of blood to your legs to make sure your blood can circulate to your brain properly. …Does it make your legs go to sleep?"

"After a high speed battle that requires a lot of concentration, a lot of heat is left in my body, so it is quickest to take my legs out of the suit and use a cooling spray on them. Oh ho ho."

"I see…" said Quenser, in vague admiration, but then he froze in place.

(Wait… If the princess is cooling off her legs too, does that mean she's taking off her special suit behind those thick steel walls right now?)

Still frozen in place, Quenser started thinking deeply like a philosopher.

When he did, the Legitimacy Kingdom's Baby Magnum turned its main guns toward him.

"You don't need to think about those kinds of things," said the princess.

"Gyaaahh!? Isn't that a little too much firepower for a joke!? And it was the Information Alliance Elite that brought it up, not me!!"

Having been brought back into the discussion, the Elite in question spoke up through her speakers.

“Heh. Oh ho ho. It seems I need to strip off this high-leg leotard-style suit and cool off my glorious G-cup body!!”

“R-really!? I didn’t know a single sentence could hold so many attention-grabbing terms! I know our princess’s suit is already on that end of things, but why would the Information Alliance go that far!?”

“It was the designer’s request. Oh ho ho.”

“…!? Now, I have no intention of defecting, but if that’s an actual occupation over there…!”

“Don’t be stupid, Quenser. Don’t get those sparkles in your eyes over the Information Alliance’s obviously fake information!! If it was actually a high-leg leotard, it would have no way of tightening around the legs for pressure resistance!!”

“Oh, you saw through it. Too bad. Oh ho ho. It does indeed cover my legs, but it instead has slits in various places to let me easily get the cooling spray inside. …And some of those places are in even more risqué places than the slit on a school swimsuit.”

“Hey, Heivia, could that one be true!?”

“Quenser!! If you keep latching onto everything she says, you’re just going to let her get under the princess’s skin!!”

After Heivia punched him in the face, Quenser came back to his senses.

(Weren’t we just about to take control of an enemy base? Why was my head filled with nothing but the shyness of a pure girl and the sexiness of special suits?)

“We have to continue with the mission,” said Quenser, working up some motivation.

“In that case, there is still a job left for you to do. Oh ho ho,”

announced the Information Alliance's Elite. "Oh ho ho. We have a request from the local tribes. Because these genetically altered forests are unnatural, they want us to burn them away."

"Oh, right. We need to change this area to our side's color," responded Quenser.

The princess then spoke up in a slightly apologetic tone.

"If we wanted to, we could burn it all away in an instant with our Objects, but…"

Using the low-stability plasma cannons powered by the Object's reactor, everything above ground and even things deep in the ground could be burned away. However, the Oceanian tribes saw the land as sacred, so they did not want it damaged any more than necessary.

"A bit of destruction and a bit of restraint, hm? Sounds like a superhero from an American comic book to me."

"Apparently, the Cultural Protection Agency is protesting that term. They say they should be called Capitalist Corporation comic books since the country known as 'America' no longer exists."

"It's because they get so worked up over pointless crap like that that no one likes them."

As Quenser and Heivia argued back and forth, flickering flames roared up in numerous places throughout the nighttime forest. The Information Alliance powered suit unit had activated their flamethrowers in preparation to light the fires.

"Hey, we don't have powered suits or anything. We aren't going to get caught up in the flames are we?"

"It's still safer than a defoliant though."

Suddenly, some static came from Quenser's radio followed by a transmission from an ally.

After listening for a bit, Quenser switched it off and turned to

Heivia.

“We have a minor job to take care of. We need to check for villages in the area before the fires are lit.”

“Can’t they use a UAV or something?”

“Actually, is it really okay to burn the villagers’ houses?”

“Contact Froleytia over your radio and talk to her about it. Apparently, the coalition forces are going to take care of getting them relocated afterwards. And since the tribes were half forced to move here in the first place, they probably don’t mind abandoning it all to get their original lifestyle back.”

They complained, but they were still glad to be doing *something* before leaving. And so, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance troops began the search while keeping an eye out for landmines or traps.

“According to the map, our area is 3 kilometers square. If we find an old cabin or something in that area, we need to knock on the door and check it out.”

“War is surprisingly boring. Well, it’s better than having it be too exciting I suppose.”

Quenser and Heivia walked along while chatting about things like how stupid they would feel if they stepped on a landmine, but they suddenly stopped.

The forest had suddenly opened up.

They were standing atop a small hill about 7 or 8 meters high. A rainstorm or something had caused the front of the hill to collapse, so it was a bit like a cliff. And at the bottom of that cliff was a small village with only about 20 buildings.

If that was all, they would only have had to gone in and given them an evacuation warning.

The problem was the military truck blocking the entrance to the

village.

Oceanian troops had come to the village.

Quenser and Heivia had assumed all the fighting was over, but they now had to frantically get down on the ground. Quenser looked through his binoculars and Heivia through his rifle scope.

“(…Damn. Why is it always us that has to have the exciting things happen to them!!)” complained Quenser in a whisper. “(The princess and the other Elite were *just* fighting over there. Did they not hear any of that!?)”

“(How should I know!? Maybe they’re a reconnaissance unit. They may have informed their higher ups where our Objects are and are stopping by here on the way back,)” replied Heivia casually. “(So what are we going to do? It would be a pain to handle this on our own, so how about we call in the Objects?)”

“(No, wait. They would certainly notice something that large approaching. They might take the villagers as hostages. And think about the specs of the Objects. The princess’s may have those anti-personnel lasers, but the Information Alliance’s just has that gigantic rapid fire beam cannon Gatling gun. That would just blow the entire village away.)”

From what they could see from atop the hill, the Oceanian soldiers did not seem about to shoot the villagers or set the village on fire. When they looked closely, they could see an old man who seemed to be the village chief handing money to a man in a military uniform.

“(Is that this month’s ‘rent’ or something? It looks like something they’re used to doing.)”

According to the map, the area they were in was near the border between Oceanian land and coalition land. The village must have been created in order to aid with the loading and unloading of cargo from trucks going between the two and inspecting the contents.

Heivia made a general inspection of the enemy troops through his rifle scope.

“(There are about 20 of them. Each of them is armed with an old-style rifle with a grenade launcher attached. Since there’s only the one truck, there are unlikely to be any more of them that we can’t see. What do we do?)”

“(What do you mean? It’s not like there is anything we can do.)”

“(Yeah, I guess not. Taking on a force while outnumbered 10-to-1 would be pretty stupid.)”

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance and were overcome with exhaustion.

If the enemy troops gathered all the villagers in the center of the village and were going to shoot the men and rape the women, they would have no choice but to fight, but it did not seem things were headed toward that worst case scenario. After the usual payment of money and items was complete, the Oceanian soldiers would likely leave the village. Quenser and Heivia just had to wait until they were gone to give the evacuation warning.

If they started a firefight in the village, it would likely just increase the number of victims.

Also, Quenser was a combat engineer, so he only had explosives. The only practical weapons they had were Heivia’s rifle and handgun. When there was no real reason to fight, neither of them wanted to start a fight where they would be at a disadvantage.

However…

“(Hey, wait. Something’s wrong,)” said Quenser as he looked through his binoculars.

The Oceanian soldiers who had been standing idly about before had suddenly begun to move. They were holding up the rifles hanging from their shoulders and searching for an enemy with nervous expressions. Meanwhile, the women and small children were fleeing for the buildings.

“(What happened?)”

“(Look, Quenser. Over there!)”

Heivia pointed toward an open area in the village. Someone was collapsed there. It was a man wearing an Oceanian military uniform. Blood was gushing from the center of his body. He had likely died instantly.

“(That doesn’t look like heat stroke to me.)”

“(So…What? Heivia, did you accidentally shoot him while looking through your scope?)”

“(How stupid are you!? Do you really think this shitty rifle has a silencer so amazing you wouldn’t notice I had fired it while you were lying right next to me!? Also, he fell in the wrong direction for it to have been me!!)”

Quenser looked in the direction opposite of the direction the man had fallen.

What he saw was…

“(That’s the border with the coalition territory… Was he shot from beyond it? So did someone purposefully throw a ‘pebble’ in from outside their territory?)”

Suddenly, a slight bit of static came from Quenser’s radio. He thought he was getting a transmission, but he was not. Small bursts of static continued intermittently.

“(Bursts of static at 0.8 second intervals… I think that’s coming from a long sight for sniper rifles! It uses lasers and electromagnetic waves to assist in the aiming.)”

“(Huh? No proper military device would broadcast its sniper’s presence so obviously. Is some idiot using some piece of crap to pretend he’s part of some volunteer army or something!?)” said Heivia angrily, but then a sour look appeared on his face. He then held up his rifle and groaned. “(Oh, shit. Not good, not good, not good!)”

In addition to the optical scope, his rifle could pick up infrared and ultraviolet and it had a microphone for searching for enemies. Since he had the headphone in one ear, he must have been listening in on the conversation between the villagers and the Oceanian troops using the microphone.

His rifle was pointed toward the one soldier and the old man who seemed to be the village chief.

“(What? What’s not good?)”

“(I don’t feel like taking time to explain it properly, so I’ll just act it out. ‘Damn you, you tricked us!’ ‘No, you’re mistaken. We would never do something like this.’ ‘Shut up. We’ll kill all of you and burn this village to the ground!’)”

“(I think ‘not good’ was an understatement!!)” said Quenser in shock.

Heivia then turned to him for his opinion, asking “(What are we going to do?)”

“(If we called in the Objects, they’d probably just shoot everyone before they arrived.)”

“(So what are we going to do!?)”

“(Well, we don’t know where this sniper is hiding and those Oceanian troops are just going to cause unnecessary harm if we don’t do anything.)” Quenser stabbed electronic fuses into the Hand Axe he had been specially issued. “(We have no choice but to just do it!!)”

Already fed up with the situation, the two nodded and began to move.

Quenser started throwing the explosives he had stuck fuses into from atop the hill. They landed a bit away from the village, but Quenser sent the signal to detonate the Hand Axe anyway. The repeated explosions sent the Oceanian soldiers frantically running behind buildings for cover.

In reality, it was only a student throwing explosives, but they likely thought it was anything from a mortar on up to a tank. The repeated explosions needlessly increased their worries.

Next, Heivia began firing one shot after another.

To hide from the new enemy, the Oceanian soldiers had hidden from the wrong direction. Heivia could see them sticking their asses out toward him and trembling, so he easily picked them off one by one. In an exciting firefight, Quenser and Heivia would have been hopelessly outnumbered, but their disturbance tactics were completely one sided.

“(Hey, I’m not going to be able to shoot them all!!)”

“(Once you take out a certain number of them, won’t they just cast off their pride and flee into the forest? They don’t seem noble enough to fight to the last man to me.)”

“(Hey, Mr. Battlefield Student, they don’t seem to be fleeing. They look like they *are* planning to fight to the very end!)”

“(Dammit, it’s that sniper! He’s shooting at them again! He’s aiming to cut off their route of escape, so they can’t flee even though they want to!!)”

The longer the battle went on, the higher the odds of the unrelated villagers getting hit by a stray bullet. Quenser and Heivia had no reason to insist on absolute victory, so they did not care if the Oceanians escaped into the forest, but the mysterious sniper did not seem willing to let that happen.

Suddenly, a plump man who seemed to be the commander looked up at the hill.

He gave a command with a gesture and all the soldiers held up their rifles.

“(Oh, shit! They’ve figured out where we are!!)”

Quenser and Heivia frantically moved back. Immediately afterwards, a storm of bullets flew their way. Since they were

shooting up at the cliff-like crumbled hill, the hill acted as a shield for them.

“(Luckily we’re far enough away that those cheap old-style grenade launchers can’t reach us.)”

“(Before long, they’ll have a force circle around and flank us. Hey, Quenser, can you set up some explosives to cut off their path before they get here?)”

However, before they could do anything more, someone grabbed their shoulders and yanked them backwards.

They frantically spun around and found Information Alliance infantry.

“(I’m not sure what the situation is here, but we’ll help out. We can send in our powered suit unit and have this finished in less than five minutes.)”

“(Five minutes, hm? Not bad, but it’s already too late.)”

Heivia pointed with his chin toward the bottom of the hill.

Various collapsed forms could be seen from people getting caught up in the firefight within the village. And they did not all belong to the Oceanian soldiers. Some of them were villagers who the soldiers had shot in their desperation.

Also, a great number of children’s toys were scattered about from where someone had knocked them to the ground in their hurry to escape.

Among those toys covered in sand, dirt, and blood was a single picture book. They were some distance from the village, but the details of the cover could be seen through a rifle scope.

The title of the book was The Kind Beasts of the Rocks.

It was the same book they had seen the local girl holding outside the barricade to the coalition maintenance base zone.

Heivia clicked his tongue and threw his rifle to the ground.

“(Fine, I get it. This is fucking war. Innocent women and children are killed for no good reason. …Do it. Go kill all those god damn Oceanians.)”

The Information Alliance man nodded silently and gave the order to the powered suit unit. Paying no heed to the downpour of bullets, they jumped down from the top of the collapsed hill.

“Hey, I found him,” said Quenser as he put down his binoculars and pointed.

He was not pointing at the village. He was pointing at the border between Oceanian and coalition land.

“I found that sniper. Look, he isn’t Oceanian or coalition. It’s one of those reporters. He’s switched out his camera for a rifle. That explains why he isn’t using a proper military sniper sight. He was starting a battle for his own personal satisfaction. Maybe he’s one of those mercenaries turned cameramen Froleytia was talking about.”

“Okay,” said Heivia as he picked his rifle back up from the ground. He then turned to the Information Alliance man. “We’ll take care of the sniper. I won’t feel satisfied until I’ve punched him a few times.”

Part 6

After having returned to the maintenance base zone, Quenser and Heivia leaned silently up against a passageway wall.

Froleytia spoke to her two subordinates.

“I checked the report, and it seems the owner of that picture book was not the girl you feared it was.”

Quenser and Heivia remained silent for a bit longer.

Finally, Quenser opened his mouth and said, “Do you think that is enough for us to be relieved?”

“I know that, as soldiers, we have no right to pretend we’re innocent, but this isn’t the type of war we want to fight.”

“I see,” muttered Froleytia before grabbing a nearby doorknob and entering without knocking.

She sighed at the troublesome job that lay ahead of her.

She was within a small room.

She had long, silver hair with a hint of blue, a long, narrow hairpin modeled after a Japanese kanzashi, and was inhaling gray smoke from a Japanese-style kiseru. She took the notebook computer and tablet sensor from under her arm and placed them on a table. She normally used a pen-shaped input device on the computer to send orders to distant units, but the monitor was closed.

Froleytia looked straight forward.

A chair was bolted to the floor across the small table from her and a man was sitting in it with his arms shackled to the armrests.

He was the reporter.

Quenser and Heivia had told her about their guess that he was a

former mercenary, but Froleytia disagreed. A mercenary willing to enter a battlefield without an Object to protect him would have a harsher look in his eyes. Most likely, an even harsher look than a proper soldier.

He was most likely some rich kid come from outside of Oceania who fancied himself a person of culture.

“Mr…Sewax, was it? You have caused quite a bit of trouble. Are you aware that this is a military interrogation room and that you have done something warranting bringing you here?”

“Remove these restraints,” said Sewax quickly, cutting off Froleytia. “I have no obligation to speak without a lawyer present, but I’ll do you a favor. This is a clear human rights violation. You have no right to rob me of my freedom. Remove these restraints this instant.”

“…”

“What, are you mad about the sniping? You soldiers are so worthless. Are you trying to say I’m a murderer just because I’m not part of the military? In other areas of conflict like Oceania where not even Objects have been deployed, mercenaries travel from safe countries, remove a few of the enemy troops, and then freely return home. Are you saying they are criminals, too?” Sewax grinned as if to say his rights were absolute and that no one could lay a finger on him. “All I did was what you all have forgotten to do. Isn’t it your job to put a bullet in those Oceanian monsters? I merely did it for

you and now I will write a report on it and change the public opinion. To be blunt, you are not carrying out your job on a fundamental level when you get so upset over someone taking out a few Oceanian troops. Do you really think you can end their tyranny like that?"

Froleytia grimaced while Sewax looked at her with scornful eyes.

He overlooked the change in the soldier's expression.

"Due to the Objects, you fools have forgotten what it means to be soldiers. I'm going to write about you when I return to the home country. I'll tell everyone how you soldiers have forgotten what it means to fight and how you panic at the slightest sight of blood. Not to mention how you lost your ability to think rationally and illegally restrained an honest, hardworking reporter."

Froleytia slowly placed her long, narrow kiseru on the table.

Immediately afterwards, a great noise rang out.

She had grabbed Sewax's shoulders, picked up the reporter, chair and all, and thrown him forcefully against the wall.

"Gbh…Ghaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!?"

The force of the blow smashed the back of the chair to pieces and Sewax's body bent backwards. However, Froleytia's narrow arms did not allow him to collapse to the ground. She held his body against the wall and brought her face in close.

"There were four," Froleytia said in a low, cold voice she had not used before. "If you had merely killed enemy troops, we would have been praising you. However, there were four. Four unrelated villagers were killed thanks to your unwanted actions. Those people would not have died otherwise. And one of them died from *your* bullet, not the Oceanians'."

"Cough. But thanks to that, you were able to make the decision to attack the Oceanians! We cannot overlook even the smallest evil!! What I did wasn't wrong!! If I write up a report on this, the people of the world will resent the irrationality of war and anti-war

sentiment will start to spread. This age where we rely on you soldiers who do nothing but swallow up our taxes will come to an end, you idiot!!"

"Oh, is that so!?"

Froleytia took Sewax's body from the wall and swung him around. The centrifugal force slammed his back down on top of the small table.

As Sewax coughed, Froleytia continued speaking.

"Then let me tell you something. It turns out those Oceanian soldiers were not in that village for their regular payment. They were there on an irregular visit. Even if you had not attacked with that sniper rifle, they would have obeyed their commands from above and systematically started attacking villages."

"Th-then…"

"And they were doing this because of the actions of reporters like yourself!! Due to the coalition intervention, the Oceanian military nation thinks international society is taking them lightly. To show just how powerful they are, they came up with a ridiculous plan to actually strengthen their forestation and to slaughter the villagers!! They are using their own people as cards in the negotiation by saying their deaths are our fault for ignoring their orders and sending in the coalition Objects!! Why do you think we did not let any reporters or cameramen near the Oceanian border? Because we had already learned of their plan! They had no one to witness the slaughter and transmit it around the world, and that is why the Oceanians had not begun this meaningless slaughter before! However, your thoughtless actions gave them the push they needed!!" said Froleytia, regretting her own foolishness rather than Sewax's. "What do you think the Oceanians are going to do now that their comrades have been killed? They were trying to show off to the international community and instead suffered a great disgrace. They are sure to escalate the slaughter now in order to erase this from their image! They will now 'search for the killer'. They will arbitrarily choose a 'suspicious-looking' tribal village, send in troops, and slaughter them all until they are satisfied!! Did

you hear that!? Until they are satisfied!!"

Sewax's body stiffened in shock upon hearing that.

"B-but I am a journalist of the Legitimacy Kingdom. I made sure to fire into Oceanian territory from coalition territory. Why would they target Oceanian villages? That's utter nonsense. Even that military nation would not take action without any evide-"

"Do you really think they will listen to that kind of reason!!!!!?"

Froleytia finally clenched her fist and punched Sewax in the gut.

Sewax was unable to restrain the nausea and spewed vomit across the floor. Froleytia grabbed his hair and spoke to him with a face filled with anger.

"They see the villagers' lives as no more valuable than an insect's!! If they feel like it, they will kill them regardless of whether they have evidence or not! That is why I said they would slaughter them until they are satisfied! They will attack the villages they do not like out of anger over their fellow soldiers being killed!! Did you think trials to enforce proper laws exist in this country!? How many innocent lives do you think will be lost thanks to this PR stunt of yours that was for nothing other than to sustain your own pride!?"

It was unclear if he had finally understood what he had done or if it was merely a chain reaction from emptying the contents of his stomach, but tears began falling from Sewax's eyes.

"To be honest, I wish I could just hand you over to Oceania's foolish leaders, but unfortunately, the Legitimacy Kingdom has excellent human rights laws. I can't just casually hand you over." Froleytia let go of his hair and seemed to have regained some of her cool when she spoke again. "Do you understand? We were barely managing a careful balance on this battlefield and your actions have changed that to the long, drawn-out fight we all dreaded."

Part 7

As Froleytia's interrogation came to a close on the monitor in front of them, Quenser and Heivia both looked away from the screen at about the same time. They left the small observation room filled with recording and analysis staff and began speaking once they were alone in the passageway.

"Hey, Quenser. How long do you think until the Oceanians start 'searching for the killer'?"

"If the estimations from the electronic simulation team are accurate, then the military nation's Object is only Generation 0.5. Its level of tech is too low to have all the proper functionality of an Object." Quenser chose his words carefully. "An Object's reactor is like a nuclear reactor or a blast furnace in that it is more efficient to keep it running constantly rather than switching it on and off. However, the Generation 0.5 is too weak. If it kept its reactor running for long periods of time, its inner parts could fuse. As such, its reactor is usually kept off. If we calculate back from how long it takes for its revolution speed to get up high enough for it to move around…"

"That would mean we have somewhere between 4 and 5 hours," said Heivia as he checked the time on his military wristwatch.

Quenser nodded and said, "According to Froleytia, they intended to have their massacre of the village caught by a reporter's camera in order to show off their strength to the world. Now that they have failed in that, the Oceanian military must go for something even more shocking to wipe that previous failure from everyone's minds. In that case, wouldn't attacking a village with their Object be the most obvious course of action for them?"

It may have been given the unflattering name of Generation 0.5, but it was still an Object. The Legitimacy Kingdom or Information Alliance's state of the art Objects might be able to defeat it easily, but a powerless village would have no hope.

At the current rate, they would just slaughter everyone to acquire

the “obvious tragedy” they wanted.

“This is bad. If we don’t find that Object before then, this will be very, very bad.”

“But how are we supposed to find it? The satellites have been monitored for months, and it still hasn’t been found. How are the two of us supposed to find and destroy this Object in just 4 hours?”

“Destroying it will be simple enough. We have over 20 coalition Objects here. If we can tell them where the Generation 0.5 is, they can focus all their firepower and simply blow it away.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning we just have to come up with a way of finding the thing. We might be able to figure something out if we look at this from a point of view other than the satellites.”

Just as the two of them were about to begin, someone interfered.

It was Froleytia who had just exited the interrogation room.

“To be honest, I would like to let you two do that, but I can’t. That’s what the higher ups have ordered.”

“?”

“If the Oceanians are going to have their Generation 0.5 Object give us a strip show and reveal itself from its concrete building, then we have a chance. The higher ups want to simply watch with the satellites and wait for it to leave one of the base zones. If they notice any reconnaissance attempts, this rare opportunity could be ruined and we would be back to pointlessly searching along the ground.”

“So you’re telling us to just *let* them attack some small village!? I know you know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of an Object attack without one of your own!”

“When we spot it leaving a base, we can intercept it before it begins its attack!! We will not allow even a single other person become a

victim!!”

“But surely the Oceanians realize we can see them! What are you going to do if we happily head after the target spotted by the satellite and it turns out to just be a gas tank with treads!? Meanwhile, the real one will mercilessly burn a village to the ground, mix in with some other gas tank, and escape to a different base!! If that happens, we’ll have to do it all again. Are you just going to let them attack village after village until we get it right!? It may be wrong to say this after we attacked those Oceanian troops with Objects, but an Object isn’t something we can let be sent after unarmed civilians!!” shouted Heivia, losing sight of any of the formality he should show his superior officer.

Most likely, Froleytia agreed with his concerns, but something was preventing her from agreeing with Quenser and Heivia’s view.

That something was military regulations.

“I would like to send at least you two, but I can’t overturn these orders,” said Froleytia bitterly.

Seeing her expression, Quenser and Heivia fell silent.

“And don’t try to access the military database. In order to prevent having information on our Object leaking to the other members of the coalition, the security has been increased. If you try to access data that goes against your orders, you’ll be court martialed before you know it.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

Heivia still refused to give up, but Froleytia turned her back on them.

“I need to make some preparations to ensure we can head out as quickly as possible as soon as the coordinates come in from the satellites,” she said before leaving.

Left behind, Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

“Hey, Quenser, what do we do now? You had special access to the

data on Objects after Alaska, right? Can't you use that to get into the database without anyone noticing?"

"If I had that kind of skill, I would have just hacked in before they gave me access. It's impossible. There's no way we can search the database for information on the Generation 0.5 in this situation."

Quenser then stuck a hand in his back pocket and pulled out a folded up map.

Heivia was surprised, but Quenser merely pointed at the map and said, "So I think this is a case where analog means would be best."

Part 8

Quenser and Heivia exited the building and circled around behind it. They sat down on the hard, dry ground and spread out the map.

“Oceania is huge,” groaned Heivia.

Quenser nodded and said, “Well, it is large enough to contain most of Western Europe. It isn’t called a continent for nothing.”

“So how are we supposed to find a single Object in such a huge area?”

“It would take years to do a thorough search, but it seems they have a general area they think it is in.”

As he spoke, Quenser used a red pen to draw a large circle around one side of the map.

The circle was on northern Oceania.

“They think it’s in the Northern Territory between the Kimberley region and the Tanami Desert.”

“So somewhere in here?”

Even narrowing it down that far left an area as wide as the wider portions of Honshu, one of the Japanese islands belonging to the Capitalist Corporations. It was not an area they could search by foot.

“Two years ago, when the Generation 0.5 was completed, the Oceanians held a parade around there. After that, it hid amongst the many mobile gas tanks with treads they sent scattering and entered one of the bases. However, we still do not know which one.”

“So that’s why the coalition has been going around destroying the bases despite knowing they’re likely dummies. If they keep taking out bases in the area, they’re sure to get the right one eventually.”

“To be honest, they would probably find it eventually even if they did nothing, but who knows how many villages would get attacked in the process.”

“Yeah, we can’t just leave this to them anymore.”

“But here’s the problem. There are over 100 dummy facilities and around 40 gas tanks have been brought up to the surface. The higher ups have no way of knowing which one is the real deal.”

“Could there be a base that has been kept completely secret so the higher ups don’t even know about it?”

“It’s not impossible, but I doubt it. Keeping the satellites from detecting a building to hold something that large is no easy task. And even if they hid it underground, it would need ducts and entrances that would give it away.”

“So it’s almost certain that it’s hiding in one of the buildings the higher ups know about, hm?” muttered Heivia.

Quenser stared at the area of the map he had marked.

“If only there was some sign that only the real one would have.”

“You mean like maintenance equipment constantly being brought in? In that case, wouldn’t the bases with large roads leading to them be the most suspicious?”

“The base we just attacked had a dummy road leading to it.”

“But not many of them have a space large enough for a 50 meter Object to pass through. Even the base from earlier was surrounded by the green forest and had no sign of an Object having passed through.”

“It seems the bases with Object-sized paths leading to them were attacked first. All of those have already been destroyed. That’s why we were ordered to attack a target that didn’t really seem like it could possibly be right.”

“But what else is there to go on? If destroying all of the suspicious

places didn't work, does that only leave destroying all of the less suspicious places one by one?" said Heivia carelessly.

Most likely, the higher ups had come to the same conclusion.

However…

"What if we turn this on its head?" said Quenser.

"Hah?" said Heivia with a stupid expression on his face.

"The Generation 0.5 was only ever seen two years ago when it was completed. Ever since, it's been hidden in a base somewhere. Couldn't they have grown up trees and plants around that base to cover up the path the Object used?"

"Why would they do that? If they surround the base like that, it would leave an obvious trail the second it left. They would basically be marking the base for us."

"The base would be marked by the satellites anyway, so all the broken trees wouldn't matter. After its attack, it could hide among a number of gas tanks and head to another base. Of course, that would mean we've been going around destroying its possibilities for its next base."

"That means the suspicious bases would be the ones with thick obstacles around them. The most abandoned looking bases that the higher ups probably dismissed right away would be the most suspicious."

"The bases most quickly covered in the forest over the past two years are these three here, here, and here. It seems the higher ups decided they were merely dummy bases that were abandoned and allowed to be overtaken by the forest."

"That leaves two problems," said Heivia as he stared at the points marked with the red pen. "First, the distance between the bases is still too great even after narrowing it down to three. We can't search all three so easily. If we came to a dummy, we would lose a lot of time." He lit the map up with a small light. "Second, even a dummy facility is going to be filled with soldiers. Even if we

managed to take them out, they would still manage to contact the real base. Then they would simply scatter a number of gas tanks and the Generation 0.5 would be gone. The attacks on the villages would merely be delayed a bit."

"And for a third problem, we can't get any help from the military or the Objects."

"Are you sure about that? Even if we were ordered not to do this, surely at least Froleytia would send the princess out if we actually managed to find the Genera-…."

Suddenly, an emergency alarm began sounding within the coalition maintenance base zone. The deep blare of the siren reverberated through the night sky. All the lights in the base turned on at once like during a night game of baseball.

"What's going on? We haven't left the base yet!"

"No, you idiot. The Objects have been ordered out! Have the higher ups figured out where the Generation 0.5 is!?"

Quenser folded up the map and looked around.

A great number of soldiers were pouring out of the buildings. He also saw the princess running to the maintenance area. The maintenance workers who had been working on the Object opened up the giant shutters.

Quenser grabbed one of the rushing soldiers to speak to him.

"What is going on!? Did we find the Oceanian Object?"

"Yes. I'm finally going to get to return home! The final boss is waiting for us on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. The coalition Objects are headed there at full speed, but we have to hurry there on military trucks. It's first come first serve for the trucks with good suspension, so you should probably hurry. If you're too slow, your back is gonna be hurting."

"The Great Sandy Desert?" muttered Quenser blankly as he watched the soldier run off.

“Hey, that isn’t one of the three places we were predicting,” said Heivia, having realized the same thing.

“How odd. On what basis are the higher ups convinced the Generation 0.5 is there?”

This time, Heivia stopped a passing soldier. He had an indoor uniform and was apparently an Object analyst just like Heivia.

After a short conversation, Heivia returned.

“As I thought, it was from the satellite. When an Object’s reactor starts up, a faint energy signal leaks out. Apparently, the satellite caught that.”

“But the Oceanians have been able to fool our satellites this far! If we had a method that convenient to detect it, we wouldn’t have been fooled by those gas tanks!!”

“It was because of those bitter experiences that the higher ups had a new type of meteorological weapon prepared. That new weapon has finally been deployed. It’s something like the chaff missile used in Alaska. It scatters special particles at high altitude which temporarily turn the huge clouds themselves into giant sensors. When the satellite used those sensor clouds to search the surface, it picked up on the faint signal of an Object. We didn’t even know if that prototype Object emitted the same type of signal and the particles don’t always mix with the clouds properly due to the wind direction, water density of the clouds, and other factors, so it was mostly luck that let us find this.”

“But,” said Quenser who was still not satisfied. “Even so, wasn’t the Generation 0.5’s reactor stopped?”

“They have to raise its revolution speed bit by bit when they activate it and it must have reached the point where the satellite could pick up on it.”

“Really?” asked Quenser with a frown.

That military nation had constructed dummy bases across Oceania and used gas tanks with treads to trick the satellites, so would they

really give away their location so easily? It was like they were asking for the over 20 coalition Objects spread out across the continent to focus their fire there.

After thinking for a bit, Quenser raised his head.

He seemed panicked.

“No, that’s the prototype reactor!!”

“What!?”

“With the prototype reactor, no one knows if it’s going to work or if it’s going to suddenly blow up. No one would put that on their Object! The usual method is to create a safer second reactor based on the first to put on the Object. Oceania probably has a prototype reactor, too. They’re trying to hide where they are starting the real reactor by running the prototype all out at the time when we know they will be activating their Object!!”

“Aren’t you reading too much into this? The sensor cloud is a prototype weapon that hasn’t been officially deployed yet. How could the Oceanians build a trick around the effects of a weapon that doesn’t even have a proper spec sheet!?”

“If this was the first time the prototype had been used, you’d be right. However, it’s been 2 years since the coalition army has been stationed here in Oceania. That toy may have been tested here a few times. If it has, the Oceanian army could have gathered the data on the failed experiments and guessed at what it was supposed to do. There’s still a risk that this is a trap!!”

“You have got to be kidding! The princess and the others are about to leave!!”

If Quenser was right, the princess and the others were headed to a dummy base. And while their attention was drawn elsewhere, the Oceanians’ Generation 0.5 could attack nearby villages.

The Oceanian military knew that they could not win in a straight fight against the coalition forces. That was why they were using the tribes that opposed their policies as hostages in an exceedingly

military style of diplomacy. They were saying that even more tribal people would be killed if the coalition did not immediately leave.

Quenser and the others could see that more slaughtering in the name of forest preservation would not make the over 20 Objects leave, but many people's lives were at stake regardless.

If the princess and the others continued, that ridiculous plan might actually be carried out.

"God dammit!!"

Quenser and Heivia frantically headed out from behind the building in an attempt to block the way of the Objects. However, the Objects were much too fast. The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance Objects cut across the ground faster than a bullet train. They shot past Quenser and Heivia before they could get near and exited the base zone.

Only the dark thundercloud-like noise of the princess's Object remained.

"Shit! Can we call them back on the radio!?"

"Both Objects here were sent out, so they must have had an official order. And one with a high level of authorization at that. Our personal communication isn't going to be enough to get them back. They'd definitely be punished if they did!!"

Quenser frantically thought as he watched the soldiers leave the base in truck after truck.

Seeing him, Heivia said, "What are we going to do? It is possible that the Object really is in the Great Sandy Desert like the higher ups say, but…"

"That's it!" Quenser replied. "If this is the prototype reactor, then this is a trump card they haven't used even once in the two years since their Object was completed. They've kept it hidden even while letting their soldiers be slaughtered in the dummy bases. Why are they all of a sudden using it now? Why do they want to trick us that badly? It has to be to get the threat of our cutting edge Objects out

of this area! The Generation 0.5 must be nearby!! They realized we would soon find it if they didn't do anything!!"

An expression of shock appeared on Heivia's face.

"Then, the facility hiding the Generation 0.5 is…"

"Most likely, it's the base closest to here of the three we were looking at! But this doesn't prove anything. We need data showing reactor energy leaking from the facility!!"

The two looked back toward the nearby building.

If they could access the military database, they could check almost instantly. However, the database that contained Object designs and battle strategies was an especially sensitive thing in the military. If they disobeyed their orders and accessed it, it wouldn't be surprising if they were shot without even being given a trial.

"Anyway, just sitting around isn't going to help anything. The data we need will only be in one of the buildings, so we need to at least get inside. We need to find some way of viewing the information from the database…"

"Hey, Quenser. Were any of the old higher ups the type to not like digital things?"

"?"

"If any of them had the report for the pre-mission briefing printed out, the data we need might still be there on a piece of paper. That way we wouldn't have to even touch the database."

And so Quenser and Heivia headed for the large facility the briefing had been held in. Most of the soldiers had already headed out to the Great Sandy Desert, so barely anyone was left inside.

However, the two of them saw something that made them groan when they reached the briefing room and peered inside the cracked door.

"(Why is Froleytia of all people still here!?)"

“(She may look showy with those giant tits and all, but she’s actually a pretty serious worker.)”

After one last look at his large-breasted commanding officer operating a notebook computer, Quenser stepped back from the door. Even if the document was inside the room, they could not check with Froleytia there. If they made any suspicious actions, she would likely confine them for some arbitrary reason or another.

“(Is there no way to get a look at the printed out report without running into Froleytia?)”

“(What if we caused some kind of disturbance to lure that Japanese obsessed woman out of there?)”

“(If we did that, we’d definitely be court-martialed after everything was over.)”

While the two were only able to stand by wondering what to do, they heard a slight knock.

They turned around and heard a male voice.

“I know.”

The voice was coming from the other side of the door to the interrogation room.

The reporter named Sewax was speaking to them.

“(What the hell? Why is the interrogation room not soundproofed!? He can hear all of the goings on of the military from in there!)”

“(This place was only designed to maintain Objects. They probably never even thought of the possibility of taking prisoners. It looks like they threw that room together from parts they had on hand.)”

“I know!!”

Something banged against the door harder than before.

Quenser and Heivia were worried Froleytia would hear from the

other room, but Sewax continued speaking.

“I could hear what they were saying from in here. The higher ups seemed split as to where the Generation 0.5 is hidden. I think they had two candidates, but they ended up choosing the stronger signal in the end. That was the Great Sandy Desert.”

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

“(What do we do, Quenser? Do we hear him out? He might just be making it all up.)”

“(From what he did before, he may be a terrible person, but I doubt he would do anything that would benefit Oceania. Let’s hear what he has to say.)”

Having made up his mind, Quenser spoke to the locked door.

“Where was the other location!?”

“Somewhere called the Tanami Desert.” Sewax must have really wanted to tell someone because he answered without hesitation. “Some of the higher ups were skeptical, but the Tanami Desert signal was just too weak and the Great Sandy Desert one was a much more realistic reading for an Object, so they abandoned the other one.”

“Just as we thought,” groaned Quenser.

The Tanami Desert was the location of the closest base Quenser and Heivia had decided was suspicious. If the Generation 0.5 activated there, it could attack the nearby villages or even the coalition base itself.

“Not good. It’ll take a while for the princess and the others to head out to the Great Sandy Desert and back.”

“That means we have to do something ourselves. We’re right back to the usual hell!”

Quenser checked the location on the map and Heivia mentioned that they would need a vehicle. However, they were cut off by

Sewax speaking up once more.

“Wait. Please take me with you.”

“Ahhn? Hell no. We can’t take a civilian onto the battlefield with us. And we don’t have time to aid you in your escape.”

“No, not that. I want to make up for what I’ve done. I brought this situation on us all, right?” Sewax’s voice held a certain impatience to it. He sounded completely different from when they had first brought him back to the base zone. “All the footage we ever get is of close-ups of two Objects fighting, so we never get to see what happens to the local people. That is why we all see war as something not worth worrying about. I came here because I could not forgive that. But I was wrong. You build up your strategies with the insight of experts and I ruined it all with my amateurish ideas. I thought eliminating those Oceanian soldiers would improve the situation for the tribes, but all I did was doom innocent people to violent deaths. And many, many more people are going to be killed! I can’t overlook that. Surely there is something I can do to make up for what I have done!!”

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a quick glance.

“You can use a sniper rifle, right?”

“Y-yes. I have no military experience, but I do go to the shooting range on the weekends.”

“As long as you can shoot someone, that’s enough. We’ll prepare something for you. We definitely can’t bring you along if you’re unarmed.”

“I understand. Thank you. Thank you so much! I’ll be waiting!! Please let me fight alongside you!!”

From the sound of his voice, Sewax may have been crying on the other side of the door.

Quenser moved a bit away from the door to the interrogation room and whispered to Heivia.

“(Hey, let’s go find a vehicle. It would be best if we didn’t have him fight.)”

“(I had a feeling that’s how this would go.)”

Heivia followed suit, turning his back on the interrogation room door.

As they headed for the exit, Quenser said, “If we brought him with us, he might decide a wonderful death on the battlefield was the only path left for him. He pisses me off, but I would still have trouble sleeping if he died right in front of me. Also, we’d get into a lot of trouble if we brought a member of the press to the battlefield and he died.”

“Well put, hero. But let’s work on not getting ourselves killed either. Waking up again is just as important as getting to sleep in the first place.”

The two of them exited the building.

Heivia ran off somewhere and when he returned, he was driving a military off road vehicle. Quenser climbed into the passenger seat and Heivia sped off.

As they exited the base zone, Quenser asked a question of his companion.

“Hey, do you even have a license? You’re my age, so aren’t you too young?”

“In the Legitimacy Kingdom, you can get a special military license. It only lets you drive on the battlefield, though. Y’know, when are we going to get past these four wheeled things? Not much has changed since automobiles first appeared on this earth.”

“All the cutting edge technology goes to the Objects. Why would they waste their effort developing other military items? Advances are being made bit by bit, but I heard that the speed of civilization’s development has slowed. Apparently, things like guns and tanks would likely have advanced at least 3 generations in the time since the Object was first developed, but that hasn’t happened. …

Actually, if you don't know all this, should you really be driving? Wait, does this model have a passenger side airbag?"

"Oh, shut up. No military vehicle has those balloons that blow up when they receive a shock. Look, we're moving forward. Isn't that all the proof you need that I can drive?"

The noble heir crudely drove the off road vehicle forward while manipulating the steering wheel in a way that would likely have made a proper driving instructor scream.

"Hey, hero. Do you have your explosives? This Generation 0.5 is still an Object, so this is still going to be the usual type of life-or-death struggle."

"I have my usual complement of Hand Axe and electronic fuses. … But I doubt we can take it out just by attaching bombs to its armor."

"Oh, right, right. What are we going to do about the princess and that prototype reactor? If they're bringing out their prized dummy, they'll certainly have set up some kind of trap."

"You're right. This could be bad. Can you contact them on the vehicle's radio? I have my own radio, but I want it set to send out the detonation code for the electronic fuses. I can receive signals fine, but I'd rather not mess with the transmission frequency. All the recorded frequency slots are filled up with detonation frequencies."

"Just a second. I'll set the frequency."

Operating the steering wheel with one hand, Heivia used his other hand to grab a small wired microphone similar to what a taxi driver might use. Using a shared frequency the entire coalition force would pick up, he started speaking.

"Umm, testing, testing. Can anyone hear me? I have a warning for all you diligent Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers out there. Sorry to disappoint you, but what you're chasing after is likely a fake. The real one is in the Tanami Desert."

An odd noise came in through the radio's speaker.

Quenser ignored it and leaned in to speak into the microphone.

“Most likely, the facility in the Great Sandy Desert holds the prototype reactor rather than the Object. Also, there is a good chance a large scale trap lies in wait. They could even be planning to push the reactor’s output past its limits to make it go critical and destroy any nearby Objects in the explosion.”

Despite how many people had to be listening, no response came for a bit.

Everyone must have been trying to work out how credible that information was.

Finally, the Information Alliance Elite spoke up as if she was the representative of them all.

“Do you have any definitive proof of this? Oh ho ho.”

“No,” replied Quenser immediately. “We didn’t have time to verify it. We have one claim to that effect, but it was from someone we can’t exactly trust.”

“Then…”

“That is why we are suggesting both possible targets are destroyed. One thing we know for sure is that the energy readings of a reactor were detected in two different places. Oceania has only one Object, so one has to be real and one has to be fake. But what do we lose if we destroy both?”

“We feel the more hidden base in the Tanami Desert is more suspicious than the much too obvious one in the Great Sandy Desert,” added in Heivia.

After a bit of silence from their allies, Quenser spoke up again.

“As I said before, we believe the Great Sandy Desert base is a giant trap using the prototype reactor. Just to be safe, not even the Objects should carelessly get close. Stay at least 10 kilometers away and blow the facility away with your main guns. This isn’t some fast moving target, so I’m sure the princess can manage if she stops and

aims carefully."

"Oh ho ho. I am a bit annoyed that you do not seem to expect anything of me," said the Information Alliance Elite.

In annoyance, Quenser replied, "Your main gun is a rapid fire beam Gatling gun, right? It may be overwhelming at close range, but it can't aim precisely when it comes to distant targets, now can it? This is a job for our princess."

"…I will do my best," cut in the Legitimacy Kingdom princess.

Hearing that, Heivia whispered to Quenser.

"(Our princess finally got her reward. I can tell your guts made it across to her.)"

"?"

Quenser merely looked confused, but he didn't have time to worry about what Heivia had meant. There was something else he had to get across.

"We believe the Object is actually in an area on the west side of the Tanami Desert. It's only about 5 kilometers from our base and apparently a faint reactor signal was detected coming from there."

"Basically, if you end up having nothing to do there in the Great Sandy Desert, we hope you'll be kind enough to come lend us a hand."

Suddenly, another voice came in over the radio.

It was Froleytia.

Her radio's transmitter must not have been working properly before because the staticky sound of her fiddling with it could be heard.

"Wait just a second. Do you mean you two are headed for the Tanami Desert!?" she said.

"Oh, is this about that whole court martial thing? Let's make a deal.

If the Object turns out to be in the Great Sandy Desert, you can throw us into a detention room, but if it's in the Tanami Desert, you have to do one thing we ask of you, no matter what it is. By the way, I've always wanted to have a beautiful woman do various things to me with the bottom of her feet!!" said Heivia.

In shock, Quenser shouted, "Wait, you're actually asking that!? Oh, and I'd rather have the beautiful woman do various things to me with her armpit!!"

"Wh-what…? D-don't make a bet like that without my consent and you could at least request more realistic things!!" shouted Froleytia.

"We've barely begun! There's still the nostrils or the back of the ear!!" the two shouted in unison.

"Why even bring it up when you know I'll never do anything like that!?"

Froleytia's last shout brought Quenser and Heivia back to their senses. Why were they getting so oddly excited while on their way to fight an Object?

"The real problem here is that we'll be more than heroes if we take out the Generation 0.5 on our own. Maybe we'll get another medal. Actually, we might pass Froleytia right by if we keep this up."

"No, Heivia. Whatever happens, we're still disobeying our orders. We might even get our previous medals stripped from us."

"No, you idiots! After everything you've done, I can't let you go off like this!!" While the two boys had been half joking, Froleytia was truly angry. "The Generation 0.5 is still an Object!! If it really is in the Tanami Desert, you will be fighting an Object on your own! Don't you understand that!? At least wait until one of our Objects arrives!!"

Quenser and Heivia fell silent when they heard their superior officer's surprisingly kind words.

For a short bit, they seriously thought about what Froleytia had said.

However, they did not stop the off road vehicle.

Quenser and Heivia both spoke into the radio.

“But we have to go. If we wait around, the Generation 0.5 could start moving.”

“If villagers end up being slaughtered because we were tricked by Oceania, the coalition’s reputation will be in tatters. You might even get demoted.”

Froleytia started to yell something, but Heivia switched off the radio.

Silence continued for a bit, but Heivia finally spoke.

“Various things with the armpit, hm?”

“I’d say that’s more normal than the bottom of the foot.”

“(Hm, I wonder if the princess would be willing to offer up her armpit for you?)”

“?”

As the Object-destroying duo chatted, the off road vehicle continued on.

Part 9

The Tanami Desert was a desert in name only.

The area spreading out before Quenser and Heivia's eyes was a giant tropical forest like the Amazon. There were relatively few animals for the amount of nature because the number of plants had been artificially increased in a short period of time. It would still take some time before animals would settle in.

"It would be best if we walked from here on out," said Heivia as he stopped the off road vehicle at the entrance to the forest. He then grabbed the rifle and portable anti-tank missile from the back. "I'd rather not announce our presence with the sound of the engine. There will definitely be soldiers if it's a dummy base and there will likely be soldiers if this is the right one too."

"Also, if the vehicle gets destroyed, we'd have to walk back to the base."

"Ha ha. Yeah that would be bad. ...Actually, that really would be bad. Let's hide it."

The two of them proceeded to camouflage the vehicle by putting fallen tree branches and the like over it.

After disguising it, Quenser took a step back to view it.

"Will we even be able to find this on our way back?"

"If we make it too obvious, the enemy soldiers might spot it. Let's get going. No matter what we do, we'll still be left with worries."

And so Quenser and Heivia headed into the thick forest on foot.

It was exceedingly rare in that day and age, but people still fought other people in "old" battlefields where Objects were rarely used. In those cases, landmines and other traps were common. Quenser and Heivia advanced through the forest with extreme caution.

“Come to think of it, I heard that the ruler of Oceania disappeared along with the Object.”

“Yeah, as the pilot Elite. Otherwise, Oceania would have long since been liberated. How many times do you think we’ve attacked their capital with an Object?”

“Isn’t that a lot worse than attacking small villages?”

“The only ones allowed to live in the capital are the military and those profiting from the military’s actions. When the military regime came into power, they took all the normal citizens’ houses and kicked them out into the wild. There’s nothing wrong with blowing up some of the people left.”

“Shh. Look at that. Isn’t that the Object maintenance base zone?”

Quenser and Heivia stopped walking and crouched down. They hid in the tall grass growing from the ground and peered out at the facility in question.

It was a giant rectangular concrete building.

It was large enough to contain the entire 50 meter Object. Smaller buildings dotted the area around it. They were likely either related facilities or garrisons for the troops.

Quenser looked down at his military wristwatch.

“Okay, we still have 2 hours before the reactor should be ready. The Generation 0.5 shouldn’t be able to move. I don’t know how many soldiers are stationed here, but getting here before the Object can move certainly makes this easier.”

“Hey, doesn’t something seem odd?” asked Heivia.

When Quenser focused with everything he head, he felt a slight vibration under his feet. It slowly grew until the plants and trees around him were clearly shaking.

“This is bad! I’m pretty sure the reactor is going strong!”

“L-let’s hope for the best. Maybe the low-tech reactor is going critical after they tried to restart it after such a long period without being used.”

“If that’s what’s happening, it’ll blow up and kill us too. Well, I can’t help but expect the worst. Maybe they used some kind of secret weapon to shorten the time it takes to activate the Object,” replied Quenser.

Just after Quenser’s comment, a loud dull noise rang out.

The front wall of the giant maintenance building was actually a giant shutter. It had opened upwards.

At the same time, white steam poured out.

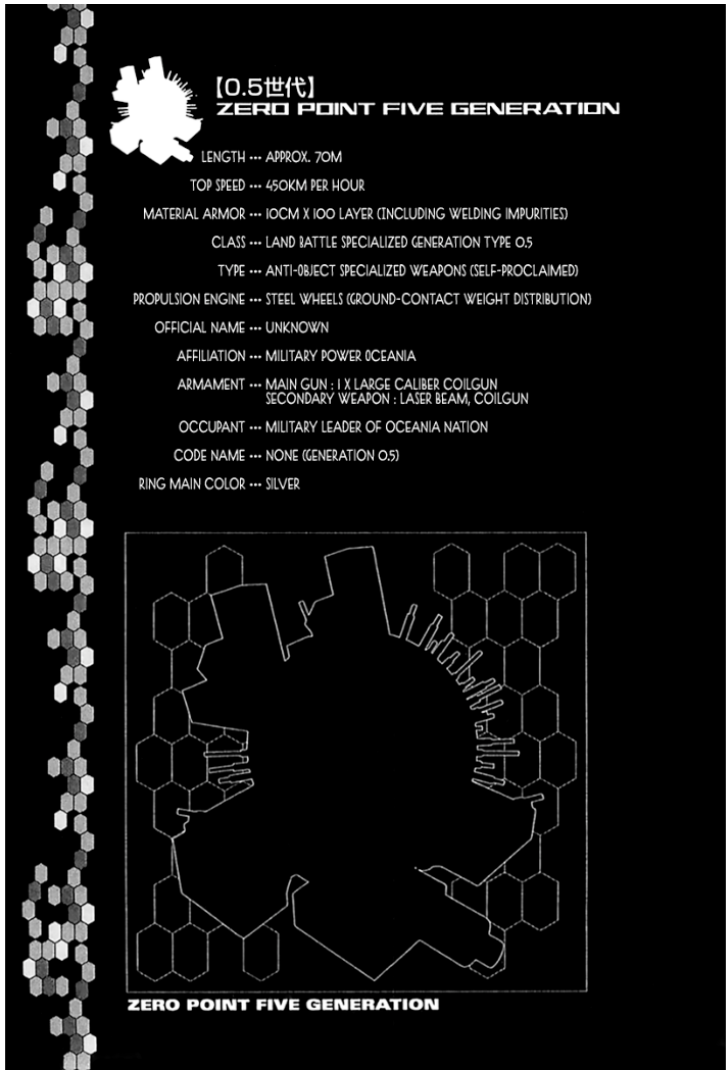
A giant form crept out from the maintenance building as if it was hiding its silhouette in the smoke.

“…Well, it certainly seems like it’s gone critical,” muttered Quenser.

Even from 500 meters away, he could feel the waves of heat emanating from the Object.

The spherical main body of the Generation 0.5 had multiple large constructions attached to it. It had an X-shaped propulsion device attached to the bottom and giant building-like masses attached to the back of the sphere like wings. Obviously, it could not fly. They were most likely used to release the excess energy created by the reactor that was so hard to control with their level of technology.

A single main gun was attached to the left side of the sphere.


【0.5世代】
ZERO POINT FIVE GENERATION
LENGTH ··· APPROX. 70M
TOP SPEED ··· 450KM PER HOUR
MATERIAL ARMOR ··· 100CM X 100 LAYER (INCLUDING WELDING IMPURITIES)
CLASS ··· LAND BATTLE SPECIALIZED GENERATION TYPE 0.5
TYPE ··· ANTI-OBJECT SPECIALIZED WEAPONS (SELF-PROCLAIMED)
PROPULSION ENGINE ··· STEEL WHEELS (GROUND-CONTACT WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION)
OFFICIAL NAME ··· UNKNOWN
AFFILIATION ··· MILITARY POWER OCEANIA
ARMAMENT ··· MAIN GUN : 1 X LARGE CALIBER COILGUN
SECONDARY WEAPON : LASER BEAM, COILGUN
OCCUPANT ··· MILITARY LEADER OF OCEANIA NATION
CODE NAME ··· NONE (GENERATION 0.5)
RING MAIN COLOR ··· SILVER
ZERO POINT FIVE GENERATION

It was a few dozen meters long and reinforced with numerous steel bridge-like wires. It would likely have been fine without them, but there was a risk of the gun damaging itself with its own weight while it was held horizontal for long periods of time. It was a cheap countermeasure that would never have even been considered for a normal Object.

In exchange for the stability, affixing the main gun like that robbed it of almost all ability to move the gun independently. For any small

adjustments to its aim, the entire Object would have to move.

That unrefined construction made the Object lose its image as a modern smart weapon and instead have the image of a primitive and savage weapon. It would not give you a peaceful death. Its presence sent a chill down their spines.

From a distance, Quenser stared at the Generation 0.5 Object that had appeared amid that strange heat.

“Most likely, they used an electric booster to force up the temperature of the reactor. The Information Alliance Object has electrical outlets on it, remember? This is the opposite. I guess it’s sort of like the ignition of a gasoline engine. By pouring in a large amount of external electricity, they activate the Object’s internal laser emitters or something. That allows them to interfere with the reactor…but it failed. A small scale explosion occurred in the maintenance facility.”

With the Information Alliance’s high level of technology, it may have been possible to pull that off. However, Oceania’s Object already held the danger of fusing its inside parts if the reactor remained active for too long. Forcing the reactor past its normal functionality had simply been reckless.

“The maintenance workers in there must have been utterly annihilated. Actually, that might be why we haven’t seen any sign of soldiers around here. They may have been holding a ceremony to see the Object off and it blew away all of them at once.”

Heivia used the auxiliary functions of his rifle to check for any noise in the area, but he did not detect any human voices.

Quenser, Heivia, and the Generation 0.5 Object were the only things around.

If they could destroy it, the battle in Oceania would essentially be over.

Part 10

However, Quenser and Heivia were not stupid enough to charge straight at the Object.

The Generation 0.5 had not yet noticed them, so heading out into the open would have been tantamount to suicide.

“(Let’s sneak closer while making sure it doesn’t notice us. If a small explosion occurred in the maintenance building, the area around the plug was likely damaged. If we can find the damaged portion, we might be able to do something.)”

“(I’m fine with taking this slow, but what if the Object charges off at full speed to kill villagers in the name of ‘forest preservation’? I don’t know how fast that Generation 0.5 can go, but I’m sure it’s faster than we can keep up on foot.)”

“(Its reactor has been activated for the first time in 2 years. I’m sure it’ll make sure to carry out some exercises so the Elite can refamiliarize himself with the controls. It won’t be going anywhere right away.)”

Suddenly, the Generation 0.5 Object moved slightly 500 meters away from them. The 70 odd sub weapons, both large and small, moved separately as if in some kind of warm up exercise.

Finally, all of the Object’s guns froze in place and the main body moved to aim the giant main gun. It looked as if all of the pilot Elite’s attention was on those exercises.

And then the main gun fired as if to mow down everything in a vertical line.

The Oceanian Object used a large caliber coilgun.

A giant coil made out of a bundle of conducting wires had steel shells passed through it. The power of magnetism was used to fire the projectiles.

That main gun was firing shell after shell in rapid succession like a pitching machine.

The countless shells moved from right to left like a machinegun, tearing a horizontal line through the thick trees.

Quenser and Heivia hugged the ground.

The line of deadly projectiles passed right over their heads and the dense forest was torn to pieces around them.

“(Shit! Did it notice us!?)”

“(No, its aim is too general for that. This is probably another of its ‘warm up exercises’!! It hasn’t noticed us at all!!)”

At any rate, it was much too dangerous to approach the Object in a straight line. Quenser and Heivia slowly crawled along a large looping route.

“(This undergrowth hides us better than I would have thought.)”

“(It can hide landmines and other traps just as well, so don’t let your guard down.)”

The undergrowth rustled and swayed around them, but with the destruction to the surrounding trees the Generation 0.5 was causing, it didn’t notice such a small change.

“(It really does seem like an older model. It doesn’t have any kind of ingenious mechanisms like the Information Alliance’s Gatling gun-style beam cannon. From the look of it, the coilgun’s barrel will burn away before long if it keeps firing.)”

“(Well, old model or not, it’s still way too much for us to handle.)”

“(How do you think it aims?)”

“(A camera sight would be the standard. My guess would be it has a camera on each weapon so it can be aimed. If it was using ultrasonic waves to search for our pulses, this undergrowth wouldn’t be helping to hide us at all.)”

“(Meaning?)”

“(Standard camouflage will work on it. C’mon, let’s cover our clothes in mud. Even that should help hide us.)”

However, they could not exactly stop and carefully prepare. Coilgun fire was still flying by nearby. The most they could manage was to occasionally roll over onto their backs in some mud as they crawled forward.

Eventually, they managed to get only 300 meters away from the Generation 0.5. They were approaching in a spiral with the Object at the center, so they had crawled much farther total. After getting in a position located behind the Object, they finally managed to escape the threat of the coilgun.

“(Okay, now we can finally find a weakness in peace.)”

“(Hey, we’re about to enter the grounds of the base.)”

Perhaps due to being activated for the first time in 2 years, the Generation 0.5 was completely focused on its system checks. That was clear from its test firing before.

Quenser crawled a bit further and peered at the Object through his binoculars.

If the Object’s reactor had been forcibly brought up with an external power supply, it had to have a plug somewhere. And if that had caused a small scale explosion, it may have a crack running from the reactor to the plug.

(Is that it?)

Quenser looked all over with his binoculars and finally stopped on a single point.

On the back right portion of the spherical main body, he saw something that looked like a broken hatch. A power cable over 50 centimeters thick was hanging down with a torn end.

It had likely connected the electrical booster directly to the reactor.

Normally, the line would be cut off with countless thick bulkheads so it could withstand any powerful attack.

(Or is that weakness one of the reasons it's known as the Generation 0.5 and thought to be destroyable with a nuke?)

Just as he had that thought, Quenser heard a high-pitched electronic noise.

It had not come from the Generation 0.5's sensors. He had accidentally touched one of the infrared security lasers surrounding the maintenance base zone.

"Oh, shi-…!?"

The Generation 0.5 Object did not take the time to turn its giant form around.

The rear facing ones of the 70 odd smaller weapons attached all over its body made slight adjustments to aim at the two boys.

However, they were lucky.

Just before it fixed its aim, a portion of the Generation 0.5's wheels struck a small marsh. The 50 meter Object was not about to sink into such a small area of water, but it did change the time Quenser and Heivia had from a few seconds to about 10 seconds.

"Heivia! Hand me that missile!!" shouted Quenser as he ripped the portable anti-tank missile from Heivia's grasp and rested it on his shoulder.

He was not aiming at the Object.

For one thing, a student like Quenser did not know how to properly use the missile's sight. He merely pulled the trigger, sending the missile flying out and into the muddy marsh just in front of the Object. The missile stabbed into the center of the marsh and exploded, scattering mud everywhere. With a splattering sound, one side of the Object's armor was painted the color of mud.

Immediately afterwards, the Generation 0.5 moved its guns despite

their cameras being covered in mud.

“Shit!!”

Quenser tossed the empty missile launcher aside.

Instead of getting down for cover, he and Heivia ran off as quickly as they could. As soon as they did, the area they had just been in was blown to a thousand pieces with the tremendous sound of a shell hitting. The two were stuck by the shockwave and blown a few meters through the air. They rolled along the ground, stood back up, and continued to run. They were no longer headed toward the Generation 0.5. They were now running straight toward the cover the maintenance facility would provide with survival the only thing on their minds.

The Generation 0.5 finally started to slowly turn around so it could aim the weapons not covered in mud at them. However, it had lost sight of them by the time it turned around. The camera-equipped weapons aimed all over the place as it searched for them.

With his back pressed up against the maintenance facility wall, Quenser said, “Damn am I glad that thing is so low-tech. A standard Object would have had plenty more sensors to track us with.”

“Surely even that piece of junk has wipers installed, right? I’ve never head of an Elite crying and raising the white flag because of a bit of mud.”

Quenser glanced down at the Hand Axe in his hand.

He poked just his head out from behind the maintenance facility and focused on the thick cable hanging down to the ground from the Object’s armor.

“(That’s definitely a weakness, but do you honestly think I can get close enough to attach this?)”

“(If you’ve been working out enough that your muscles can deflect shells, then you should be fine.)”

“Dammit,” cursed Quenser.

He had a general plan. He knew what its weakness was. He had every tool he would need to use. However, he still could not defeat the Object. That giant machine was not something to be defeated by such small things. Its overwhelming firepower was a thick barrier in the way of the path to victory.

Quenser clenched his radio in his hand.

It was meant to be used to detonate the Hand Axe, but it could be used for other purposes as well.

He could contact his allies.

“(Hey, would it be okay to make a transmission with this thing?)”

“(I’m sure the Generation 0.5 would notice right away, but I doubt it would be able to pinpoint our location. The real question is whether the princess and the Information Alliance Elite will be able to get here anytime soon. The Great Sandy Desert is pretty far away.)”

“(So are we going to be stuck running away until they get here?)”

“(That would make an excellent diet. The only real problem is that you’d die 100 times over before losing a single pound.)”

Despite Heivia’s words, Quenser still hit the switch for the radio.

The Generation 0.5 was not an opponent they could defeat with standard methods.

Part 11

The black thundercloud-like noise of an Object moving using static electricity reverberated throughout the Oceania night.

After reaching an area near the Great Sandy Desert, the Objects of the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance came to a stop.

The princess checked on a magnified image of her target.

The Oceanian artificial greening project had only just begun in that area, so most of it was practically a wasteland of sand dunes. In the center of that was a collection of concrete constructions. It looked like a large scale supply station centered around a gas station located along a long, long desert road. In fact, it was officially registered as just that. However, the abandoned-looking buildings were in fact an Oceanian military facility.

The Elite called “the princess” by her allies aimed at the facility with one of her main guns. She was 10-13 kilometers from her target, so she was obeying the instructions her comrades had given her.

With a great explosive noise, a line of light shot out from the low-stability plasma cannon. The line of light stabbed into the main concrete building, spreading bluish-white explosions about. Her distance was a bit too great to pierce the armor of a high-spec Object because the plasma energy had time to dissipate, but it was more than enough for a mere concrete building or the armor of the low-tech Generation 0.5.

After she fired on the same building a few more times, an even larger explosion occurred. The prototype reactor had exploded.

The scale of the explosion was smaller than she had expected.

The blast only had a radius of 300 meters, so even the alterations to the reactor to make it go critical must have failed. The small

explosion seemed to signify just how low the Oceanian military nation's level of technology was.

The princess received a transmission from a Legitimacy Kingdom communications soldier.

"According to the report from the satellite division, no sign of anything that could be a functional Object can be seen within the wreckage of the facility. Most likely, this was a dummy using a prototype reactor, but our orders are to check the facility out just to be sure."

"But isn't that your job, not mine?" the princess replied.

"Oh ho ho. They are asking us to remain on standby in case an Object emerges from the wreckage. It is something like being a pool lifeguard."

The princess felt it was a waste of time.

Just then, she received a transmission from an unexpected person.

"…Ksshh…This is Quenser. We have confirmed the Oceanian military nation's Object is in the Tanami Desert. I repeat, we have confirmed the Oceanian military nation's Object is in the Tanami Desert! As the electronic simulation division predicted, its tech is only at a Generation 0.5 level. With our cutting edge models, a single shot from the main gun should finish it off! We request reinforcements. We don't care who from! Just send an Object with a giant gun our way!!"

"Whoever gets here first, wins!! If you don't hurry up, we'll take all the glory for ourselves!!" cut in Heivia's voice.

She could also hear some of the soldiers muttering their disbelief that the Object was actually there.

The princess started to turn her Object around, but another transmission came in.

"No. No reinforcements are to go to the Tanami Desert. That is a direct order."

The princess froze in place.

(Whose voice is that?)

From the frequency being used, it seemed to be someone from the Legitimacy Kingdom military, but…

“I repeat, the transmission from the Tanami Desert is a trap. No one is to do as it says. Quenser and Heivia have headed off on their own and seem to have become confused.”

(Wait, this voice is…)

She recognized the voice as belonging to the Councilor Flide.

The Councilors led the Legitimacy Kingdom and he was said to be the one who had put together the coalition force and sent them to Oceania for the sake of his election. However, that identity held another great meaning for the princess.

“As you can tell from our data, Oceania’s Object truly was in the Great Sandy Desert. The prototype reactor and the Object were both in the same facility. The Oceanians were afraid of our attack and hurriedly had the Object escape while leaving the prototype reactor behind. The real Object is still out there in the Great Sandy Desert somewhere. We must not let it escape. If we turn back for the Tanami Desert now, the Generation 0.5 Object will disappear again.” As the soldiers listened on in bewilderment, Councilor Flide continued. “Quenser and Heivia know this, but they are afraid of having to fight the Object, so they are intentionally trying to have us waste our time on the dummy facility in the Tanami Desert. They will soon be arrested, but the Generation 0.5 Object in the Great Sandy Desert comes first. Do not be deceived by Quenser and Heivia’s words.”

Whether the Tanami Desert facility was a dummy or not should have been immediately obvious from the satellite.

When moving slowly, an Object and a gas tank could be difficult to tell apart, but if Quenser and Heivia were facing the object in a fight for their lives, the Object would be moving much more

quickly. Even the slower Generation 0.5 would not be mistaken for a gas tank with treads.

(There is something more to this…)

The princess finished turning her Object in the direction of the Tanami Desert.

Acting on their orders, the soldiers following her tried to stop her, but normal firepower could do nothing against an Object.

The princess ignored them and headed on, but then her Object came to a sudden stop.

Only one thing in that area held the firepower necessary to make her stop.

“Oh ho ho. Aren’t you supposed to obey the orders of your superior officers?”

“You…”

The Information Alliance Object was pointing its main rapid-fire beam cannon Gatling gun toward her as the princess glared at it through her sensors. The soldiers must have thought the two Objects were going to enter a direct confrontation because they broke rank and scattered.

“A possible enemy Object’s Elite must not be allowed to act on her own discretion. This is not a concept unique to the Information Alliance. It is common to all militaries that use Objects. Oh ho ho. Your actions could lead to a great slaughter. I cannot overlook an Elite disobeying her orders.”

“Councilor Flide lead the Legitimacy Kingdom. You have no reason to do what he says.”

“Oh ho ho. That may be true…”

The Information Alliance Elite showed no sign of moving her rapid-fire beam cannon Gatling gun.

The princess moved her arm-shaped main guns.

They both aimed their main guns at the other's reactor.

The eerie dark thundercloud-like noise reverberated across the area from the bottom of the princess's Object.

"…but I was ordered to record our joint actions together to investigate the technology of the Legitimacy Kingdom's Object. Normally, that would have been done while we fought alongside each other, but if you are picking a fight, I will gladly take the opportunity. Oh ho ho."

Part 12

Quenser's face paled when he heard that ominous transmission.

"Wait, wait, wait. What is going on!? What was that about us being confused!? How can we be confused about the Object right in front of us!?"

"Councilor Flide, hm? If I recall, he used to work in the munitions industry and holds an important position related to the Objects. He manages all of the positions related to improving the talents of our Elites."

The two frowned while they wondered why he would be interfering.

And then they received their answer from the radio.

"You two have betrayed our expectations," said Councilor Flide.

"?"

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

They had not expected him to contact them directly.

"This transmission is being sent only to you two who betrayed our expectations."

"Your expectations? Did we do something that harmed your chances of getting reelected?"

"Sending this coalition force to Oceania was part of your plan, wasn't it?" added Heivia. "Are you saying we'll ruin people's impressions of this war if our muddy faces are broadcast into people's living rooms?"

"Quite the opposite. You two have done *too* well. If only you could have been a bit more incompetent," replied Councilor Flide in a smooth voice. From his tone, it sounded as if he was reading from a

prepared script. “Flesh and blood soldiers destroying an Object is a wonderful story that gives hope to those with none. However, the carefree residents of the safe countries are not the only ones this gives hope to. Had you realized that the guerillas and terrorists continuing reckless fights around the world have become more active recently?”

“…”

“This hell in Oceania was created by you two,” said Councilor Flide.

The two boys listened to the words of that man who was likely their enemy.

“It is true that the coalition forces – including the Legitimacy Kingdom forces – have spent the last two years doing very little, but the war should have ended a month ago when so many Objects were brought in. That was right when you were fighting that Object in Alaska. Modern wars are quite simple. The winner and loser can be easily calculated from the quality and quantity of Objects on either side. If you have one Object and your enemy has three, you decide that fighting will gain you nothing. As such, you quickly retreat to lessen the damages as much as possible. War was nicely built up so the loser would give up right away.”

That was how the war in Oceania had been supposed to turn out.

The military nation possessed a single Generation 0.5 Object while the coalition force had over 20 cutting edge Objects. Normally, the second that many Objects were spread out across the continent, Oceania would have raised the white flag. That would have brought the war to a quick end.

In fact, that was exactly what Oceania had done up until then.

All they had been able to do was just barely keep their prized Generation 0.5 hidden.

However, they had instead planned and begun to carry out a military strategy using the Generation 0.5. They had even used their prototype reactor as a trap.

“Yes, this is all thanks to the amazing results you two produced.” His tone was one of scorn. “War is no longer just about Object vs. Object. Flesh and blood humans can destroy an Object. What you two proved in Alaska is seen as hope by guerillas, terrorists, and old-style dictators. This hope has robbed them of their sole chance to raise the white flag. This has led to the war continuing on much longer than we ever expected. The benefit for my campaign has become overshadowed by the costs of the battlefield. We can’t have that. Is it really that surprising that some wish to correct this new deviation in how the world sees war?”

“So you want us to die here?”

“You specifically want us to be killed by an Object, don’t you? If the news gets out that the heroes that destroyed Objects were themselves killed by an Object, the flesh and blood troops would give up, deciding that our victories were just flukes.”

“War needs certain fundamental understandings if it is to be smartly ended in the shortest amount of time. No one wants extended conflict on the battlefield. What you two are doing will only needlessly lengthen wars and increase the numbers of the dead.” Councilor Flide's voice did not waver. “Originally, the plan was to cause a split between the forces in the coalition base and have you two get caught up in a battle between cutting edge Objects. However, it seems you have done us a favor and found the Oceanian Object on your own. We would prefer not to damage our precious Objects, so we will not stop you from having the Oceanians play the dirty role.”

On the surface, Councilor Flide’s argument may have been just.

It may indeed have been true that Quenser and Heivia had played a role in lengthening the war in Oceania. It may indeed have been best to leave all fighting in wars to Objects while leaving the flesh-and-blood soldiers and civilians to be nothing but side characters.

However…

“If you let the Oceanians kill us here, that Object will then head off and attack nearby villages. How can you be okay with that!?”

shouted Quenser.

“We are tracking the Generation 0.5 with the satellite. This will be the final massacre for the Oceanians. Afterwards, we will finish it off with one of the coalition Objects.”

After hearing how readily the man said that, Quenser had the proof he needed.

The Councilor was thinking nothing of justice or peace.

“You two need to realize that you have become dangerous enough that a plan to eliminate you must be carried out even if it requires that level of sacrifice. If it is merely between Objects, war can be carried out smartly. That way, no needless harm will be done. Your hope has gotten in the way of that.”

(Yeah fucking right.)

It was true that the winner and loser were decided solely by the Objects in that kind of war. However, that did nothing to eliminate the slaughter of the rest of the soldiers. Quenser and the others had almost been slaughtered when they had lost their Object in Alaska. In the Strait of Gibraltar, all of their bases had been destroyed just because the princess had been a little late. On the battlefield, there was no kind rule that said the rest of the soldiers would be overlooked just because they had lost their Object.

Quenser summed up his thoughts on the Councilor’s argument in his next statement.

“Only someone who has never lost could make that argument.”

“You only want to protect your own interests,” said Heivia. “You just want to hold onto this world where the countries with the most Objects hold all the power. The countries without Objects and the normal soldiers being targeted by an Object all realize there is something wrong with the world. They realize that Objects are nothing but weapons used to slaughter people as efficiently as possible.”

The idea that the fight was over before it had even begun was just

plain wrong.

It was living human beings that picked up their guns and fought.

No matter how puny they were, they still fought with everything they had.

It was wrong to say they had lost before the fight even began. The world was not so boring that it did not allow for coincidences and unlikely wins.

Councilor Flide was one of the people who had invested massive amounts of money in constructing Objects and made even more money from their victories in wars. His argument was merely the argument of the people like that who wished to keep their important positions in the world.

“Say what you will,” said Councilor Flide in the tone of voice of one who held many Objects in his control and felt untouchable. “Either way, you two will die there. We will monitor the Generation 0.5 as it carries out its attack and send a coalition Object to utterly destroy it. This way this war will end up being what we had originally planned. It will show a cutting edge Object conquering all that gets in our way.”

“I see. Then let’s make a bet.”

Quenser and Heivia both spoke into the radio to pick a fight with the leader of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

“If we lose to the Generation 0.5, you get what you want.”

“But if we win, it’s over for you.”

Quenser turned off the radio and clicked his tongue.

“Shit, this means we aren’t getting reinforcements! There are coalition Objects all across Oceania, and not even one of them is coming!!”

“Hey, Quenser. What about the princess?”

“She might come if we asked, but then the rest of the coalition would be her enemy. Also, it wouldn’t surprise me if the Councilor has some kind of safety device installed to keep that from happening.”

“Then I guess we have to do this on our own!”

“Yeah, let’s make sure to survive at least long enough to get a punch in on that damn Councilor!!”

While hiding behind the building, the two checked on what they had to do.

They knew one thing for sure.

They were not obedient enough soldiers to die there like their leader wanted.

Part 13

However, Quenser and Heivia were not superhuman enough to charge straight at the Object like comic book heroes.

“(I’d feel like an idiot if we got shot just trying to get near it. Heivia, let’s take a shortcut through this building to get closer to the Generation 0.5.)”

“(You can get as close as you want, but how are you going to blow it away?)”

Quenser and Heivia moved along the back wall so the Object would not see them. They finally found the back entrance and it was unlocked. In fact, the door itself had been blown away. It must have been due to the explosion within.

They entered and found a wide, open area.

They were within the Generation 0.5 Object’s maintenance facility.

Everything needed to maintain the giant Object was there, but it was all bent up. Cranes lay collapsed on the ground and meters larger than industrial refrigerators had been discolored by the intense heat. Corpses lay here and there. Lots of corpses. Around 40 people wearing military or work uniforms had been almost completely cooked.

Quenser’s feet almost stopped as he entered, but he had no choice but to head on. If he turned back there, the Generation 0.5 Object would create even more tragic corpses.

“(What are you looking around for, Quenser? Let’s go. Or are you that interested in those horrid corpses?)”

“(No, it’s just that this is the Generation 0.5’s maintenance facility, so…)”

“(So you’re looking for a spare of its main gun or something? Even if we found one, we’d need an energy source to run it with. If a

convenient prototype reactor was lying around here somewhere we might manage, but…)"

"(No, I was wondering if the Object's plans might be lying around here somewhere. We might be able to find a weakness if we had those.)"

The two split up and searched through the large maintenance facility.

When they had snuck into the enemy base in Alaska, they had found mountains of static electricity-producing turbines that had turned out to be the Water Strider's weakness. Similarly, they might be able to find a special weakness of the Generation 0.5 from its spare parts or its plans.

"(Hey, what's the Object doing? It didn't go off to attack a nearby village because it lost sight of us, did it?)"

"(Of course not. I think it's cleaning the mud off its cameras. It seems to be letting it dry and then deflecting the powdered mud away with a negative electric charge. I think it's a similar technique to those masks that don't let pollen near.)"

Heivia peered out through the large open shutter the Object had exited from. A cutting edge Object would have been able to find people in a building with its sensors, but the Generation 0.5 did not seem to have that functionality.

Most likely, the Oceanians had mostly wanted an Object to show off to the international community as soon as possible, and having it function well in an actual war had been a secondary priority.

"(Hey, do you think this might be what blew up?)" asked Quenser.

Heivia returned from peering outside and found Quenser pointing at some large container-like objects lining one wall of the building. The containers were connected together with thick cables.

"(What are those? Batteries?)"

"(I think they might be giant capacitors. They're probably the

external power source they used to interfere with the Generation 0.5's reactor. They used diesel generators to gather energy, amplified it, and then sent it to the Object.)"

One of the containers had exploded from within. The blast had filled every nook and cranny of the sealed maintenance facility. The people within had had nowhere to run.

However…

"(Hey, does that mean it was this amplifier that exploded and not the Object? In that case, the Object might not actually be damaged at all!!)"

"(Come to think of it, if the blast had originated from the center of the Object, its thick armor should have been buckled outward. Well, we know it isn't going to be easy to take it out, so let's look for the plans in the maintenance computer.)"

"(Damn, I hope the computer wasn't destroyed in the blast.)"

They glanced around the area, but did not see the computer at first.

However, they then noticed the large computer on a second floor passageway hugging the outside wall. To reach it, they would have to climb a flight of stairs that had been almost broken in the blast. Luckily, the computer was located in an area the Generation 0.5 could not see.

"(This LCD screen has melted. It's useless.)"

"(Here's a usable monitor. Hook up the cable.)"

The computer itself still seemed to be functioning and the Generation 0.5's maintenance information appeared on the replacement monitor once they hooked it up.

Then Quenser frowned.

"(Huh? This key layout is weird. This isn't shift?)"

"(Tch. They're using a different OS than we use. I think this is an

old Information Alliance OS.)”

Quenser had some difficulty operating the computer, but he managed well enough once he realized the major differences. The keyboard was a bit discolored from the heat, but it functioned well enough.

“(Hey, Quenser. We targeted the legs and such on the Water Strider in Alaska and the Tri-Core in Gibraltar, right? Should we try that again?)”

“(From what I can see, the Generation 0.5 uses steel wheels like a train. The structure is simple enough that there are no real weaknesses to target.)”

“(Wheels? So it doesn’t use an air cushion at all? Can that really support a giant Object? Even with giant steel wheels, wouldn’t the wheels warp or the axle break?)” asked Heivia.

“(To distribute the weight of the Generation 0.5, it has around 500 wheels. It’s like those torture chairs covered in spikes. If you calmly sit on it, your weight will be distributed enough to avoid getting skewered.)”

“(Yeah, but no one’s actually volunteered to prove that, right? I thought it was just an urban legend.)”

“(It was just an example. I’m not telling you to try it out. I have no idea what would happen to you if you did.)”

Theoretically, if they could destroy two thirds of the steel wheels, the rest of them would be crushed under its weight. However, flesh and blood soldiers could not carry that out.

“(We could probably melt the armor with a direct hit from a nuke, but we don’t have any of those handy.)”

“(Even with it only being Generation 0.5, it’s still suicide to try to take it on with a frontal assault. We need to find some kind of hole in its defenses we can attack through. Oh…?)”

Quenser’s hands suddenly stopped on the keyboard.

The screen was displaying the inner workings of the device that quickly activated the Object's reactor using an external power supply. It was a new technique that not even the Legitimacy Kingdom military had developed before, but a proper Object kept its reactor running at all times, so it was unnecessary.

"(This is it. Using this is how the Oceanians here were killed by their moronic leader.)"

"(Hey, while its primary use is to start up the reactor with an external battery, it looks like it also emits excess energy to protect the reactor. A device to emit the energy as electrical power has been attached.)"

"(That may have been what failed. Raising the rotation speed is one thing, but it must have gotten too high to control.)"

"(Meaning?)"

"(Meaning control of the reactor may be lost again if another massive dose of electricity is sent into that plug.)"

As he spoke, Quenser moved away from the computer. He looked down from the second story passageway and at the container-shaped capacitors.

Suddenly, the wall right next to the two boys was blown away in a stream of fire.

It was likely from the Generation 0.5's coilgun.

The holes in the wall moved from right to left…toward Quenser and Heivia. The angle the shells were coming from was odd. The Object must have slowly circled around the building as part of its warm up exercises.

"Get down, Quenser!!"

"You idiot, we'd be killed by the fragments of the wall! Jump down!!"

The two jumped over the railing and down to the first floor. The

very next instant, the wall up at the second floor was blow away in a horizontal line. Sparks flew from the large computer and it exploded.

“Shit! I guess we can’t look anything else up!”

“We can only try out what we know. Let’s get those capacitors up and running!!”

However, they did not have time to do so.

With the wall completely destroyed at the second floor level, the maintenance facility itself had tilted some. However, the Generation 0.5 seemed dissatisfied with the lack of blood. It fired some more at the building.

Railguns, laser beam cannons, coilguns, and rapid fire beam cannons.

All of its various types of weapons turned the giant maintenance facility to Swiss cheese in no time at all. Quenser and Heivia were unable to move. If they lifted their heads, they would likely be blown away by a giant shell.

Luckily, they were not hit directly by any of the blasts.

However, they heard a dull roar.

The walls had been utterly destroyed and the roof no longer had much support. The giant ceiling came crumbling down, crushing what was left of the walls. It came crashing down straight for Quenser and Heivia who were inside.

“You have got to be kidding me!!”

They had no time to even think about avoiding it.

With a great roar, Quenser’s consciousness was mercilessly blown away.

Part 14

Quenser seriously thought his heart had stopped, but apparently it had not.

“(Dammit. Hey, Quenser! Wake up!!)”

“(What? We weren’t crushed?)”

“(The roof was supported by multiple columns like a gym and we seem to have managed to get in one of the gaps those created.)”

The roof was cracked enough that they would be able to crawl out.

However, they were not stupid enough to exit without thinking.

At the very least, the Elite piloting the Generation 0.5 thought Quenser and Heivia were dead. As long as he thought that, he would not continue his attack. Now was their only chance to prepare for their counterattack.

“(But what exactly are we going to do? Him thinking we’re dead is great, but he’s going to head off and attack the nearby villages at this rate!!)”

“(You saw that firepower. We can’t face it head on. The only way is to destroy the reactor via that plug.)”

“(Did *you* see that firepower!? We won’t have time to walk up and plug in the power cable like we’re working at a power station for electric cars!! How are we supposed to get close!?)”

“(We just need to get the electricity there without getting close. C’mere.)”

Quenser stuck his head out of the cracked roof.

He could see the giant form of the Object in the dark night. Its 70 odd sub weapons were making slight movements, but it did not seem to be searching for them.

“(Is it continuing its warm up exercises before heading out to attack those villages? God dammit.)”

“(It’s possible the reactor is acting up a bit due to being powered up for the first time in 2 years. Let’s go.)”

“(Hey, you never told me what your plan is!)”

Quenser climbed up out of the cracked roof and crawled along it. He wanted to move more quickly, but that would have caused too much noise. If the Object noticed them, it was all over.

Luckily, the cameras were the Object’s only major sensors. It had poor reception of sound. The fact that the cameras numbered in the 70s was a problem, but they could escape the Elite’s notice by blending in with the darkness of the night.

Quenser eventually reached what had originally been the maintenance facility’s wall.

There, the large container-shaped capacitors were lined up. Most of them had been crushed by the roof, but a few were still functioning.

Heivia crawled up shortly thereafter and whispered to Quenser.

“(Are you seriously planning to take that cable and charge in at the Generation 0.5!? You’ll die!!)”

“(That’s not my plan. Hey, is there any water around here? Even just a storage tank or a fire hydrant would work. I just need enough water to create a pool on the ground!!)”

“(What are you talking abou-…Wait, you mean…!?)”

“(Exactly. The torn power cable connected to that plug is dragging along the ground. If we create a huge puddle of water and run the electricity through it, it’ll pass through that cable and into the Generation 0.5’s reactor!!)”

Suddenly, they heard a sound coming from the Generation 0.5’s main gun.

“It noticed us!!”

“Quenser, over there! There’s a water storage tank!!”

It must have wanted to finish them off with its main gun because the Generation 0.5 was going out of its way to turn around.

Meanwhile, Quenser stabbed an electronic fuse into some Hand Axe and threw it as hard as he could in the direction Heivia was pointing.

A rusted water storage tank lay in that direction. Instead of being located on the building’s roof, it was on top of its own steel tower.

Just as the bomb was about to strike the tank, Quenser sent the detonation signal.

With a loud roar, the tank ruptured and the steel tower itself collapsed.

However…

“It was empty!! Was that just part of the dummy facility disguise!?”

“!!”

Meanwhile, the Generation 0.5 Object had finished turning their way.

With a slight creaking noise, the main coilgun finished its last bit of careful aiming.

They were doomed.

At the same time, the steel tower struck the ground. The tower had merely been a fake to fool the satellites, but the impact of it striking the ground tore up the earth below it. Dust flew into the air and dirt flew above Quenser and Heivia’s heads.

However, that was not all.

It must have burst a water pipe buried in the ground. A pillar of

water erupted from the ground. It could not have been a normal water pipe. The water erupted a few dozen meters up into the air and rained down on the entire area.

(Was that an industrial water pipeline? Did they use a machine tool that used water to cut out the parts for the Object?)

Really, Quenser did not particularly care what they had used it for.

A great amount of water rained down on the ground, connecting the cable hanging down from the Generation 0.5's body with the large capacitors in the crushed building.

"Ruuunnnn!!" shouted Quenser as he turned from the Object and ran.

Heivia followed just behind him.

They were not fleeing from the Generation 0.5's coilgun.

That was not something they could escape from on foot.

They were fleeing from the quickly expanding pool of water.

And then a clear path was created between the crushed building and the Generation 0.5.

Immediately afterwards, they heard a great explosive noise.

At first, Quenser thought the ground had exploded in brilliant light.

However, that was not what had happened. The massive amount of electrical power stored up in the large capacitors had spread through the pool on the ground. In an instant, it had raced 200 meters across the ground and directly to the Generation 0.5.

The target was the power cable dragging along the ground. Twenty or thirty percent of the high voltage current entered the Object and forcibly activated the laser emitters used to heat the reactor.

The main body of the Object seemed to swell from the inside.

However, Quenser did not have time to keep watching.

Heivia tackled him to the ground and covered both his eyes with his hand.

“You idiot! You’ll go blind!!”

Just before Quenser managed to grasp what Heivia meant, he heard a loud roar.

At the same time, a brilliant flash of light stabbed into his retinas despite Heivia’s hand covering his eyes. His vision and his consciousness were filled with nothing but pure white. An intense pain stabbed through his ears and into the center of his head. He then thought he felt a liquid oozing back out. He didn’t know where he was hurt, but he must have been bleeding.

He had no idea how long it took for his vision to recover.

It was possible he had lost consciousness a few times before it happened.

He was not even sure of that.

“Quenser! Open your eyes, Quenser!”

As Heivia shook him, Quenser finally opened his eyes.

He could vaguely see Heivia’s face.

“The Generation 0.5? What happened to it…?”

“Take a look,” said Heivia as he pointed with this chin.

Quenser looked over and saw the Oceanian Object ripped open from the inside. The spherical body had folded outward like a blooming flower, and its 70 odd guns were scattered about and stabbed into the ground. Due to the explosion of the reactor, the huge pool of water was gone. It had all been evaporated. The eruption of water from the ruptured industrial water pipeline had stopped. It was possible the ruptured portion had melted and sealed once more.

There was no question what had happened to the foolish leader piloting the Object.

Even if he had used an escape device, he would have been roasted in the air as he floated down in a parachute.

“It’s over.”

“Yeah. This isn’t just an issue of an Object or two. The war in Oceania is now over.”

The two sat there blankly for a bit, but they finally stood up.

Then, not one, but both of them said, “Now let’s do something about that damn Councilor.”

Epilogue

Councilor was essentially the highest position in the Legitimacy Kingdom.

The true top of the Legitimacy Kingdom was the Sovereign Parliament which was made up of the monarchs of the various cultures and civilizations making up the kingdom. However, before making any decisions, those monarchs would listen to the opinions of a council made up of otherwise employed people. Those Councilors held the highest position that an elected official who had no royal blood could attain. In some cases, they could indirectly alter the monarch's views, so they truly were seen as rulers.

One of those rulers, Councilor Flide, was sweating profusely as he wondered how someone of his position had been so thoroughly cornered.

He was in one of the most advanced of the advanced nations known as safe countries. More specifically, he was within a skyscraper that gained a special tax reduction due to being registered as a military facility while actually being his private office.

"This has become quite a problem," said a soldier named Froleytia from within the same room.

She may have had a position high enough to put together military operations and command her subordinates on the battlefield, but to a Councilor like Flide, she was nothing. Or so it should have been. However, Froleytia was showing no respect to him. In fact, she was glaring down on him with a look of scorn. She played with the long, narrow hairpin modeled after a Japanese kanzashi in her silver hair, and she held a Japanese-style kiseru in her mouth despite the entire building being a no smoking area.

A few documents were lined up in front of Flide.

They detailed the plan he had advanced in secret within Oceania.

“It seems you wanted to create a world where the result of any battlefield was solely decided by the quantity and quality of the Objects, but I’m not so sure that method can be called ‘smart’. The transmission you sent when our Object was about to head back to the Tanami Desert from the Great Sandy Desert clinched it. You say it was to ‘conveniently’ kill Quenser and Heivia, but sending a false order that would save the Oceanian Object and put our troops in a state of confusion sounds like treason to me. My only advice is that ‘I thought that information was correct at the time’ isn’t going to cut it in a military trial.”

“I had my reasons. Also, I was given authority to carry out that operation by the Sovereign Parliament. I did nothing that warrants the criticism of a soldier like you. It was nothing but a military operation.”

“Yes, you’ve come up with that excuse, and it may have held up had this only involved our military. However, you made a mistake when you sent the transmission out to all of the coalition forces and tried to command them as well. The Sovereign Parliament only holds authority over the Legitimacy Kingdom. They hold no authority over the Information Alliance military or the rest of the coalition. The other forces seem to be rather upset over that false information. Now, what do you think the Sovereign Parliament is going to do? Saying it was a secret Legitimacy Kingdom operation isn’t going to convince the Information Alliance or the others of anything. If the Legitimacy Kingdom gives no official announcement regarding this issue, it could cause some political sparks that could light some unwanted fires.”

“What do you know about this, anyway?” said Flide, sounding like he was squeezing out his voice. “We are only able to advance wars smartly because of the overwhelming firepower of the Objects. Those two have destroyed that balance!! This world needs the pillar of support the Objects provide!! I acted to protect my country, no, to protect the world!!”

“Yes, and I’m sure the others on the Council and the Sovereign Parliament have a similar opinion. They see Objects as wonderful weapons that allow them to end wars smartly. However, your actions were still ill advised. If Quenser and Heivia had been killed

by the Oceanian Object, it would have gone on and slaughtered villagers. Your actions would be seen as a leader of the Legitimacy Kingdom aiding that slaughter for the advantage of his own country. For those who wish to keep our image as one of a country that uses its Objects to end wars cleanly, that would be very, very bad. In fact, that may have left us in a worse political position than where we are thanks to Quenser and Heivia destroying the enemy Object."

"So you're saying it's over for me? For *me*!? After all I've done to solidify the Legitimacy Kingdom's place in this world where the power balance is decided by Objects!?"

"You can complain all you want," said Froleytia. Her voice then dropped and her gaze grew deadly cold. "But I am the type who takes care of the children the families of our country leave under my care. Whatever the situation may be, I feel I must finish this for them. So we can finish this in the trial. Don't think you can recover from this."

"Heh heh heh. I see. In that case, I suppose I must bring out my trump card."

"?"

"Do you know *why* I took control of the military's Elite training division? That way, I can train an Elite in secret to use for my own purposes."

Quenser and Heivia had returned to the most powerful of the nations known as safe countries. It was an advanced nation that belonged to the Legitimacy Kingdom and that was often referred to as the home country.

After the end of the war in Oceania, they had fully intended to retaliate against Councilor Flide, but approaching one of the leaders on the Council was not such a simple task. Froletyia had a different means of attack, so she had told them to let her deal with it and then disappeared into the office building owned by Councilor Flide.

“I can’t believe we got all our previous achievements taken from us as punishment for disobeying orders and heading to the Tanami Desert. We ended the war! All the honor and medals are just gone. It’s like having your life savings disappear in an instant.”

“You should be glad that was all that happened. Normally, we would have been court martialed.”

“Even though we ended the war? If we hadn’t headed to the Tanami Desert, that Object would have attacked the nearby villages and then disappeared again. The war might have continued for years!”

“It doesn’t matter. If they admitted that, they would be justifying any kind of attack that people felt they had a just cause for. They would be condoning people ditching the military and carrying out independent attacks.”

“We wanted to leave the military after our commendation for Alaska. They’re the ones that kept dragging us back to the battlefield.”

“They may have wanted it to all even out in the end.”

The two then fell silent.

Before them was Councilor Flide’s private office that Froleytia had disappeared into. As it was officially a military base, the large building sat in the middle of a wide open area within the city.

“Oh, did you receive an email from the princess like usual?”

“Yeah, but I also got one from that ‘oh ho ho’ of the Information Alliance. How did she get my address? Did I get marked by their spies for trying to ask about their Object?”

“Perk up. This could be the start of history’s first lover’s quarrel that involves Objects.”

“?”

Quenser frowned slightly.

“Froleytia certainly is taking her time. She already has the summons, so doesn’t she just have to order some soldiers to drag that bastard Flide out of there?”

“Uh, oh. I have a bad feeling about this,” said Heivia as his expression stiffened.

Suddenly, a loud rumbling surrounded them.

A portion of the wide open area around the office building started to crumble and a giant Object appeared from below.

The two exchanged a glance and then they received a transmission from Froleytia over the radios they had never expected to use in the home country.

“Dammit! Quenser, Heivia, you have a new job!! I had wondered why that bastard Flide had his office in such a wide open area, but I never expected it was for this!!”

“You can’t be serious. We have to fight in a city now!?”

“We get the general gist of the situation, but we’re actually going to have proper support from an Object this time, right!?”

“You idiot! If we called the princess in here, half the capital would be rubble before we had time to send out an evacuation warning!! You two will have to do something on your own! You wanted to deal with Flide yourselves, right!?”

“Well, yeah.”

“We can kill him, right?”

“By the way, he is only a passenger aboard the Object. The Elite is a 12 year old girl. If possible, I want you to recover her without killing her. I can justify taking that risk because a Legitimacy Kingdom Elite is quite valuable, but the real reason is I’d rather we saved the girl. Can you do it!?”

“Why does this always have to be so complicated!?”

“Well, we can’t exactly say no if it’s a 12 year old girl, now can we!? Now that he’s used someone like that as a shield, we definitely have to kill that bastard!!”

“Hey, let’s see if we can find a way to activate the evacuation device. That way we can stop the Object without killing the little girl!!”

Quenser and Heivia ran toward the spacious base as the Object appeared from within a cloud of dust and prepared for its desperate attack on the city.

As he headed toward the hellish battlefield, Quenser said, “Looks like we’re back to square one. I need to at least regain the academic background and authority of a battlefield student at the end of his deployment! Actually, will we get a new commendation if we resolve this!?”

In response Heivia said, “It should all work out. After this is over, let’s quit the military for good. I’ve had enough of fighting Objects!! I’ll take over my noble family. I’ve fought in wars against Objects, so if my family complains, I’ll bring the war to them!! When I think about it, that should be way easier than this!! What the hell have I been doing all this time!?”

“You’ve got a point. I probably would have had a much easier time of taking normal entrance exams rather than going for the battlefield student route!!”

“Hey, don’t cry!! We can finish this discussion after saving the little girl and killing Flide!!”

As they spoke, the two boys charged into the battlefield.

Before them stood a fifty meter Object.

They had only tiny explosives and a rifle.

That had become a normal day for them.

The two special combat engineers had another monster to fight.

Afterword

To everyone who has picked up this book: welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Five years after my debut, I am introducing a new series. This one is about ultra large weapons. Mechs that are not humanoid robots is my personal preference, but don't get me wrong; I have no real problem with the humanoid type. I made this choice because I felt more irregularly shaped machines would be more intimidating in this kind of story.

At 50 meters and 100,000 tons, they are quite large.

Their weight is probably about the same as two Nimitz class nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. If you add in the weight of the weapons, it's probably even more than that.

Having things like that going through careful martial arts-esque footwork at speeds of 200-500 kph may seem a bit ridiculous, but even existing weapons can do some pretty unbelievable things.

As I said before, even with how huge the Objects are, they are still only the size of two nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. When those nuclear-powered aircraft carriers are constructed, ridiculously huge cranes are used to lift the parts and numerous pillars are used to support its weight on land. With the smaller 8000 ton Aegis ships, they have large vehicles that can hold and move the entire thing. I find the creative power of humans to be amazing, but what do you all think?

Anyway, I wanted to give priority to a sense of exhilaration with this book and I used various techniques to make things more exciting. For example, I made the main character a student rather than a soldier to make him a little easier to identify with and I purposefully showed as little of the thoughts and feelings of the enemies as I could.

Most likely, many of you found some of the things the main characters said a little odd. If you think carefully, I think you will find that is partially because they showed relatively little difference in how they treated the lives of enemies and allies. I see that as the war on the macro scale playing tricks on the human mind on the micro scale. I will be glad if you simply enjoyed the story and even more so if you thought this showed just how twisted a thing war is.

I give thanks to my editor Miki-san and my illustrator Nagi Ryou. I feel this was probably quite a taxing novel to illustrate for. I am truly thankful they stuck with me to the end.

I also thank all of the readers who have read this far. Thank you so much for picking up this first novel of a new series to see if it is any good.

By the way, there is not just the one way of destroying the Objects Quenser and Heivia fought this time. If you have time, it might be fun to try to find a method they did not use.

And so, I think I will end this here.

I lay down my pen while hoping this book will remain in your heart in some way.

Is it just me or were the main characters the truly unbelievable ones this time?

-Kamachi Kazuma